



*Scholarly Dialogue*

## Knowing our African and Queer Home: A Conversation about Afrocentricity and Black Queer Studies

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### *Abstract*

This paper is a conversation between two queer-identifying Black scholars trained in Afrocentricity, focusing on the creation of a syllabus for Black Queer Studies from their mutual backgrounds. S. Herukhuti Williams addresses the challenges of teaching and researching at the intersection of Black queer and Afrocentric frameworks, highlighting that prominent Afrocentric scholars have viewed same-gender desire and love as anti-African by attributing it to a European construction aimed at destroying the African family and culture (Williams 2016, 5). However,

Jennifer Williams and Matthew Simmons assert that an Afrocentric perspective, which centers African voices while maintaining social-cultural linkages between continental African societies and its diaspora, is crucial in the understanding and interpretation of Black queer experiences past and present. Throughout their conversation, they recognize the harm of homophobic rhetoric embedded within Afrocentricity, and discuss how they contextualize it within their Black Queer Studies courses to maintain a sense of safety for their students while ensuring meaningful dialogue. Moreover, they explain their curation of Afrocentric Queer scholarship and the distinct challenges of teaching Black Queer Studies and Afrocentricity at an HBCU vs. a PWI. In conclusion, the authors advocate for the promotion of an Afrocentric approach to Black Queer Studies that is both reverent and critical.

### *Keywords*

Pedagogy, Black Queer Studies, quare, Afrocentricity, homophobia

## Introduction

After 50 years of Africana Studies, the curricula of many programs and departments largely mirrors the foundational courses Nathan Hare outlined in 1969: Black History, Black Psychology, Black Literature/Music, and courses dedicated to Black social dynamics (728-731). In response to evolving political debates within the discipline, both new courses and frameworks that address the complexities of gender and sexuality difference within Black communities, such as intersectionality and Black Queer Studies, were incorporated into the curriculum. This expansion formed a tension within Black Studies as some of its foundational paradigms clashed with its growing scope.

Afrocentricity, a framework rooted in centering Africana people, comes with the baggage of promoting a race and culture-first ethos, that often disparages Black queer individuals by positioning them as outsiders who prioritize their personal preferences over the collective struggle against racism. We, the quare<sup>1</sup> authors of this conversation, have embraced the Afrocentric intellectual tradition in our personal

lives and professional work. Yet, during our graduate training in Africology and Afrocentric thought, we found ourselves on the margins, encountering anti-queer rhetoric, or at best, tolerance-focused discourse, that left us with a sense of unease in spaces presumed to be welcoming to all Black people. These experiences have led us to question how Afrocentricity can serve as a liberatory framework in the contemporary era given its history of equating African<sup>2</sup> identity with heteronormativity. As teacher-scholar-activists, we approach Africana (Afrocentric) Queer Studies as a critical sankofic practice—one that draws on tradition, while acknowledging its past harms, to cultivate new knowledge and perspectives on Black queer life and thought.

## Background

Afrocentricity, a theoretical framework developed by Molefi Kete Asante, challenges the dominance of Eurocentric thought by placing African experiences, intelligences, and productions at the center of any analysis of African phenomena (Asante 1991, 172). It emphasizes African agency and achievements throughout history by rejecting the portrayal of Africans as passive victims (Asante quoted in Browder 1992, 256). This approach empowers Africans to act on their cultural imperatives to advance human freedom and cultivates a sense of "victorious consciousness." Afrocentricity challenges the white supremacist thought in academia and mainstream discourse and argues that the myths of African inferiority and historical absence are mechanisms used to perpetuate the oppression of African people. Consequently, it encourages the removal of problematic European concepts and methods that conflict with the mission of Africana Studies: cultural grounding, academic excellence, and social responsibility.

Yet, the proliferation of Afrocentricity, along with similar Black cultural nationalist thought, in its focus on inspiring African consciousness, often posits that gender and sexuality are fixed categories to describe humanity. This perspective asserts that there was no evidence of non-heterosexual, non-cisgender individuals in pre-colonial Africa, nor vocabulary for such behaviors or identities. Additionally, Black men scholars who developed and espoused Afrocentricity promoted a race-first agenda, asserting that other marginalized aspects of one's identity should be repressed to fully demonstrate commitment to the "more important" cause of

combating anti-Blackness. Asante (2003) articulated this view, stating, “Our initial oppression is not because we are gay or lesbian, but because we are Black. Where do we stand becomes the primary question of place. You cannot be in two places at one time” (p. 72). He positioned queerness in opposition to African identity to provoke individuals to reject queerness in the name of Black liberation.

Furthermore, early Afrocentric thinkers regarded queerness as a symptom of racialized violence or a deliberate choice to align with whiteness and distance oneself from Blackness. Asante (1992) suggested that Black men involved in White-led gay activism “live in the make-believe world of white gays” (57-58). He also implied that queerness and “effeminacy” in Black men are products of the oppressive conditions created by white supremacy, such as sexual violence during enslavement or mass incarceration. This view aligns with other revered figures. For instance, Amiri Baraka (1966) stated, “Most white men are trained to be [f\*\*\* ],” arguing that making queerness attractive to Black men is a tactic to control their superior vitality (216). It is noteworthy that much of Afrocentricity’s anti-queer rhetoric suggests that queerness diminishes Black masculinity, and masculinity is needed to fight for liberation of Black people. Asante (1992) remarked, “The time has come for us to redeem our manhood through planned Afrocentric action. All brothers who are homosexuals should know that they too can become committed to the collective will. It means the submergence of their own wills into the collective will of our people” (57). Frances Cress Welsing, Na’im Akbar, and other prominent Afrocentric scholars asserted similar, and often harsher, sentiments against “effeminate” Black men suggesting that homosexual desire and behavior among Black men was a sign of mental and spiritual pathology. In this vein, Afrocentricity often positions queerness as incompatible with African ways of being. The underlying assumption is that without the European influence on one’s sexuality, an African individual would be an appropriately heteronormative African.

Later editions of Asante’s work show an evolution of thought. In *Afrocentricity: A Theory of Social Change* (2003), he reframes his exclusionary position stating that Black queer folks who are doing the work of fighting against white supremacy are part of the community. In this shift, he acknowledges the contributions of prominent Black queer figures like James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and Bayard Rustin (Asante 2003, 73). However, Asante, despite claiming he is not homophobic, continues to

prioritize heterosexuality within his definition of “authentic” African consciousness. He stated:

I am not homophobic either, but I do not support homosexuality as a way of life for Black people. I support the rights of gays and lesbians to make their own choices and I will defend their right to be free from attacks, insults, and assaults. Nevertheless, so long as homosexuals’ primary definition of self or their most authentic consciousness is homosexuality, they are outside of the struggle (Asante 2020, 73).

During our graduate studies at Temple University, the perspective of tolerating queerness, while still perceiving it as detrimental to African personhood, was prevalent. However, recent years have brought some outward changes. Asante, and other Afrocentrists, have adjusted their stances to acknowledge queer perspectives in Afrocentric knowledge production and praxis. Osimiri Sprowal, a bachelor's degree student, received a prestigious fellowship for their work with Kimani Nehusi on social and grammatical gender constructions in pre-colonial African and contemporary diasporic languages (CLA Staff 2021). Temple University publicly recognized this queer Afrocentric scholarship with a group picture of Asante, Sprowal, and other members of the Africology department standing in the Blockson Collection (Strategic Marketing 2022). This inclusion and celebration of Africana queer scholarship reflects broader conversations about how African identity and praxis engages with the diversity of genders and sexualities.

It is commonplace to trace Afrocentricity’s lineage of anti-queer rhetoric. Scholars like Devon Carbodo and Marlon Riggs rightly critiqued Afrocentricity’s past homophobia in the 1990s. Kaila Story has addressed the intracommunal division and intellectual loss to the whole of Africana Studies when Black queer experiences and thought are marginalized in the 2010s. Given this history, we ask: is it possible or even desirable to teach and practice Black Queer Studies within an Afrocentric framework?

Following in the footsteps of H. Sharif Williams and Sekhmet Maat, we come from a more optimistic perspective. Williams and Maat assert that Africana queerness has been, and continues to be, an aspect of Africana life that has an African legacy, and can lead to African liberation. Maat even proposes an "Africana Queer

Theory" (AQT) as a "corrective and reconstructive approach" to understanding the humanity of queer individuals within African contexts. AQT acknowledges the impact of white supremacist heteropatriarchy and transcends the limitations of traditional Afrocentric thought in this area. Moreover, grounded in an African cosmological perspective, AQT differs from Euro-American queer ideologies. It suggests that desires, attractions, gender identities, and even biological sex can all be manifestations of a particular spirit/energy or one's higher self, influencing agency in the material world and aligned with one's destiny within an African social and cultural frame (Maat 2023, 128). Building on, not rejecting, Afrocentric thought, Maat calls for Africana Queer Studies scholars to "begin from where African-centered theorists leave off and refuse to go" (Maat, 2023, 137-138).

With this call, we embrace an intersectional framework, recognizing that queerness is an inseparable facet of one's African identity. We challenge the notion that "You cannot be in two places at one time" (Asante 2003, 72) as it contradicts with the truth of a complex African humanity. Within this conversation, we gave ourselves a set of eight guiding questions to direct the conversation about Black Queer Studies and its alleged tension with Afrocentricity.

**Question:** *What is your relationship with Afrocentricity?*

**Simmons:** I came into a relationship with the theory of Afrocentricity in the fall of 2011. I was a first-year master's student in the African-American Studies department at Temple University. While there, I was taught by world-renowned scholars, such as Molefi K. Asante and Ama Mazama, who spoke about Africana people from a lens I saw earlier in my life, but was never formally introduced to, until I was in the department.

Afrocentricity calls for its practitioners to centralize, theorize, and analyze the experiences of Africana people through their own cultural bases (Asante 1991, 172). To not use outside perspectives to articulate our experiences. It re-centered my perspective from seeing racial resistance in conversation/conflict with American society as a singular, isolated phenomenon, to a globalized and interlocking struggle towards liberation. It also made me re-frame and imagine the future(s) of African-descended people as victorious and already realized; we just had to sankofically tap

into our cultural memory to create that future for ourselves. It was a powerful idea that, again, I heard throughout my life through familial upbringing and undergraduate training. However, to see scholars who looked like me interpret the world through their own cultural norms, changed my perspective, radically. I was excited to find my racial and cultural community where I thought I felt safe, heard, and respected.

**Williams:** My upbringing in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, provided a lived experience in Afrocentricity before I formally understood the term. A notable example was my summer camp experience at the YWCA of Germantown, where we learned an African dance routine, sewed costumes from Kente cloth, and discussed our connection to Africa. In high school, my best friend's father, who was earning a Ph.D. in African American Studies at Temple University, further exposed me to these concepts. Dinner table conversations at their house centered on Pan-Africanism, agency, and consciousness. So, when I decided to attend Temple University for my doctoral studies in African American Studies over five years later, I possessed a very personalized foundation in Afrocentricity.

The department provided a curriculum that complemented my personal experiences. Professors introduced me to canonical texts such as *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (1990); *The Afrocentric Idea: Revised and Expanded Edition* (1998); *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (2002); *Yurugu: An African-centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (1994); and *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions* (1993). This training gave me a critical lens to challenge the dominant Eurocentric narrative that positioned Africans as inferior, secondary, and marginal. Through Afrocentricity, I reframed my perspective to view Africa, particularly KMT (ancient Egypt), as the starting point for philosophical thought and inquiry, recontextualizing African American history as part of a long African legacy and rejecting enslavement as the definitive characteristic of the African diaspora. Additionally, Kariamuw Welsh influenced my approach to cultural theory and aesthetic criticism. Her scholarship informed my dissertation by encouraging me to analyze Afrofuturism through the lens of cultural genealogy, recognizing that the African interest in technology and the future was not an assimilation of Western science fiction tropes, but a distinct critical theory rooted in the imaginative possibilities of African people and traditions.



**Question:** *What is your history with Black Queer Studies?*

**Simmons:** I want to start from a personal perspective before getting into the theoretical perspectives of Black Queer Studies. Now, Afrocentricity was, and still is, a very key component of my academic and personal development and positionality as an Africana Studies scholar. However, what I realized through scholarly investigation and environmental factors was that Black queer/quare voices, histories/futures, and imaginations were missing from the discourse of Afrocentric thought and praxis. I saw a discipline that, theoretically and personally, excluded me and those like me from the conversation and placed us on the periphery. I felt a similar erasure of identity and a certain lack of homeplace (hooks 1990) that I felt when discussing race. It's like going to a family reunion, and the people are asking you when you are going to get married to the opposite sex while knowing your tea.<sup>3</sup>

I remember a lecture at Temple University that fundamentally shifted my perspective about how I and my fellow colleagues, particularly quare-identified persons, were perceived in the department. The context of the lecture was centered around Africana Worldview and what made African-descended people ancestors: name veneration, great works, good deeds, etc. The professor then stated that quare individuals, under no circumstances, could be ancestors. Put more plainly, it was stated that our bodies would be placed outdoors for the vultures to eat our flesh (Mazama 2009, 572). Before I heard this statement, I heard whispers about how unsafe the space was for quare individuals, and I navigated the space by staying in the periphery of the power structure that was embedded there. I already came out to colleagues, some of my professors, and those individuals embraced me. I viewed Africana Studies as saving my life, giving my existence renewed purpose. However, hearing this statement personally shook me to the core. It was the quiet part that I felt growing up in Mississippi said out loud in this Afrocentric space. My presence, and the presence of a significant quare and allied graduate students, were tolerated, but not welcomed; we were utilized for our talents, but shunned for our humanity. I felt like I was back in the missionary churches in Mississippi “playing by the rules of listening to statements that homosexuality is sinful and immoral, and gays are in need of change” (Griffin 2000, 117).



My introduction to Black Queer Studies was through the lives of my colleagues and academic and personal mentors. Before coming to Temple, I heard that my personal walk wasn't in line with my culture; my sexual orientation/identity was a product of European colonization and enslavement that had no historical basis in African worldview and society. That position did not sit well with my spirit. From prior research and reading, I knew our identities were not binary, but I did not have the language or knowledge to articulate that position more succinctly. I remember going to The Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) 2015 conference in Atlanta, Georgia. My colleagues and I were at a Black-owned bookstore, and I was introduced to Sobonfu Somé's book, *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships* (Somé 1997). I opened the book to see if I could find anything on non-heteronormative relationships from an African perspective and read the chapter on homosexuality. That little book changed my life. The conversation about quare people being gatekeepers in African society spoke to me. This term comes from the Dagara community, located in Burkina Faso. The Dagara people do not have a word for people who are gay or lesbian. These non-heteronormative people were regarded as gatekeepers. They were integral members of Dagara society and believed to be the link between two worlds: the world of the community and the world of the spirit. According to Somé, there are two categories of gatekeepers. The first group guards the gates that correspond with Dagara cosmology: water, earth, fire, minerals, and nature. The second group that oversees and can access all dimensions is the gatekeepers, the quare people who "experiences a state of vibrational consciousness which is far higher, and far different, from the one that a normal person would experience" (Somé 1993). Without these individuals, the Dagara community would not have access to the spiritual world. This revelation had a profound impact on my life because it made sense that quare people gravitate to Black spiritual spaces. It made *me* make sense. I found, as bell hooks speaks of, my homeplace.

Afterward, I searched for other quare and African-centered scholarship that continued my growth within Black Queer Studies. Sekhmet Maat and Herukhuti Williams' scholarship really centered quareness in a cultural sense and made me interrogate Black Queer Studies from a cultural position. E. Patrick Johnson's work around Black Queer Studies also had a great impact on my scholarship as well.

**Williams:** I think Simmons knew I was queer before I came out to myself. I was generally seen as a little different by my peers; but, because of life circumstances, I was able to present myself as a cisgender heterosexual Black person. Although he may not know it, his confiding in me was invaluable to my journey of being open about my gender and sexuality.

At the time, the department seemed to follow a “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to queer students and faculty. Sekhmet Maat, who attended Temple’s African American Studies doctoral program a few years ahead of us, confirms this sentiment and asserts that, “Most of the African-centered queer folks at Temple felt that the only way to be valued in the community of Africana Studies scholars, was to either be in denial of oneself in their research and writing, in order to get through the program, or to be silent in response to verbal or written hetero-patriarchal ideas and discussions” (Maat 2023, 127). Despite this unfriendly culture, Africana queer folks managed to find each other, and create their own safe spaces – one turned out to be my office.

While pursuing my doctoral certificate in the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies program at Temple, I consistently looked for Black voices in discussions of feminism, gender, and sexuality. My professors directed me towards Black feminist and lesbian thought including the works of Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and the Combahee River Collective. Recognizing the intersectional limitations within my own graduate training, I became determined to explore this further.

As a proactive individual, I noticed that our department offered an online course titled The African American LGBTQ+ Experience. The course was originally developed in 2003 by Damien Frierson, a master’s degree student in the department. He was motivated to fill a gap in the curriculum after receiving backlash from Asante during a graduate student panel discussion of Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe’s *Boywives and Female Husbands* (1998) (Damien Frierson, phone call with author, July 5, 2024). With the support of Nathaniel Norment, Frierson taught the course under a special topics designation for nearly a decade. Even as an online course, the African American LGBTQ+ Experience was well-attended. In 2011, Norment reclassified the course as an elective in the major (Nathaniel Norment,

email with author, June 14, 2024). In 2012, I approached the interim chair about transitioning the course back to an in-person course and taught it the following year.

As a graduate student serving as the instructor of record, I embarked on a self-directed exploration of Black queer history and thought. I relied on Mae G. Henderson and E. Patrick Johnson's anthology, *Black Queer Studies*. This journey led me to discover resonances with blues singer, Ma Rainey; filmmaker, Marlon Riggs; and scholar, Audre Lorde. I taught the course for two spring semesters, and the Spring 2013 iteration inspired students to establish the QPOC (Queer People of Color) student organization at Temple University.

However, my efforts were not fully embraced by my Afrocentric department. This became clear in a teaching evaluation where a professor criticized my approach because I had an uncritical view of Black homosexuality. They claimed that my course must be misplaced, stating:

As I sat in Ms. Williams' class, it became clear to me that this class belongs in a Queer Studies program, not in an African American Studies program. Indeed, at no time was the African worldview introduced in the analysis of homosexuality. Thus, no objection could have been raised regarding the alleged homophobia of African people, and nor could heterosexuality be understood as the very foundation of African culture, spirituality, and social order (email to author, April 26, 2014).

This feedback did not dissuade me from teaching and learning about African queer lives and theory. When I assumed my current position at Loyola Marymount University, I proposed the course *Black Queer Theory* as an elective course for our department. This course is now a cornerstone of my teaching repertoire, fostering a deeper understanding of African-centered approaches to gender and sexuality.

**Question:** *How can one teach Black Queer Studies with a background in Afrocentricity?*

**Simmons:** Both Afrocentricity and Black Queer Studies center the voices of Africana people within their cultural and historical experiences as we seek to correct

what we were told about ourselves. This work is not just done within the academy. It must be done within the discipline, culture, and society at large. As Somé asserts, we must reclaim our position, ourselves as gatekeepers of Africana people (Somé 1997, 133-134). We must showcase how Black queerness existed on the continent and is intertwined in our cultural memory. Black queer people did not suddenly manifest when Africans were forced into contact with Whiteness. We have always existed and contributed to the formation and continuity of our people. We must hear the intersectional stories of the Orishas and other Africana spiritual entities. We must highlight the importance of quare people in carrying the traditions of the people as we were scattered throughout the global community. For instance, the show *Pose* on FX showcased quare people choosing family and being renamed into that family. Those cultural identities and performances come from a cultural memory innate to African people. Afrocentricity and Black Queer Studies call for us to address the dislocation of our people by culturally grounding ourselves within our traditions. You cannot fulfill that work without teaching Black Queer Studies.

Also, we must look at how our Black queer lives utilizes cultural memory to provide safe spaces for quare people to survive while working towards a world that is safe and equitable for quare people to live. This society does not deem us human. Therefore, as Afrocentricity and Quare Studies assert, we must be activist-scholars. We must not just theorize, but take action. Quare Studies practitioners, Johnson argues, must not be “armchair theorists” (Johnson 2001, 18). We cannot stay within the “safe” confines of the academy. Our safety resides with our people, our experiences, and our connections with one another.

**Williams:** This is the question, isn't it? As Simmons pointed out, there is still talk that queerness has no place within Afrocentric spaces and scholarship. I experienced this belief at an Afrocentric conference I attended in 2023 where the public conversation turned to the presence of transgender people within the Black community. A few attendees expressed their binary gender views suggesting that transgender people are a problem that could be solved with better education and stronger traditional family structures. Arguments for fluidity in gender and sexuality were met with the assertion that any move away from heteronormativity is a white supremacist tactic that divides our community. I responded to the audience that

these views assume who is present in the room and do harm the same people they claim as kin. This experience still gives me pause.

Lately, I have been grappling with Asante's recent epistemological turn, as indicated in *Being Human Being: Transforming the Race Discourse* (2021). He argues that Afrocentricity fiercely opposes all forms of oppression since it is a liberatory and human-centered ideology. From reading his position, I surmise that homophobia falls under Asante's definition of oppression. If homophobia is a form of anti-Black oppression, then it is also anti-human. Asante's adjustment to his foundational theory would encourage the "outing" of an Afrocentric positioning towards Black Queer Studies demonstrating that Africana Studies is capacious and fluid. While I respect the mission of Afrocentricity, I still approach teaching it in relation to Black queerness with caution. I do not ignore the fraught history where the rigidity of prominent Afrocentric scholars led many burgeoning queer Afrocentric scholars to closet themselves or create maroon spaces to conduct their "taboo" research. Even though I know Afrocentricity's anti-queer stance emerged as a particular political strategy aimed at proselytizing the uniqueness of African humanity, I feel that its exclusion of Black queer people undermined its broader goals of centering African agency transgenerationally and transcontinentally.

**Question:** *What inspired the creation of your current Black Queer Studies course?*

**Simmons:** I have taught Africana Studies and Political Science at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania since Spring 2018. My colleagues, especially Nzinga (Virgilette) Gaffin and Tamika Thomas, have supported me in being my authentic self as an instructor. We teach Black queerness/quareness/Blaqueerness from different disciplinary positions (sociological, psychological, etc.) at Cheyney. However, I recognized that there was a gap in teaching the political trajectory of Africana people because we did not look at the contributions of quare people within Black Politics. I saw an opportunity to combine Black Queer Studies, Black Studies, and Political Science to empower and enrich our student body. We have a significant population of queer-identified students on Cheyney University's campus. Therefore, I wanted to provide an academic and maroon space where those students can learn about themselves from someone who is also a part of their community.

Representation matters, not just from a racialized standpoint, but also from an intersectional perspective.

In conversations with Williams, I introduced Black queer theoretical concepts to my students (Black Queer Theory/Quare Theory, and intersectionality) and utilized those theoretical perspectives in order to ground the historical trajectory of my Black Queer Politics course. This helped them to navigate the historical and political trajectories of Black queer politics. In future iterations of Black Queer Politics, I would like to incorporate more theoretical perspectives into my classes.

**Williams:** As I mentioned earlier, when I first taught a Black Queer Studies course, it became a way to empower myself, filling in the gaps of my graduate training. I initially focused on the landscape of gender and sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance, Black feminist/lesbian thought of the 1980s, the experiences of Black gay men during the AIDS epidemic, and ball culture. In researching my dissertation and (still incomplete) manuscript on Janelle Monae, I immersed myself in Black queer theory, Quare Theory, and Queer of Color Critique. Here, I learned to critically engage with heteronormative systems and institutions while also analyzing the lifeworlds<sup>4</sup> and phenomena of Black Queer embodiment.

When I proposed the course at my current university, I concentrated on theory. My aim was for students to encounter different methodologies, build vocabulary, and develop critical thinking skills that not only addressed the Black queer lived experience but how the marginalization of Black queer individuals manifests in politics, media, and society. In hindsight, a theory-heavy course as the sole Black Queer Studies offering in my department was ambitious. While my students have been dedicated learners, many arrive to this upper-division course with little background from previous courses to draw from. This year, my interest in Africana Studies curriculum development has led me to consider two approaches to address students' unfamiliarity with the foundations of Black Queer Theory: proposing a distinct introduction to Black gender and sexual differences course or reinforcing better integration of gender and sexuality analysis of Africana communities within my department's required lower division courses. In discussions with Simmons, we are questioning when and how to introduce, practice, and demonstrate different content and methods, such as those informed by Black Queer



Theory and Afrocentricity. Additionally, we are envisioning strategies to train and support our colleagues in our respective departments in this intersectional endeavor.

**Question:** *What are key historical people, events, and texts that you think are important for introducing students to Black Queer Studies from an Afrocentric perspective?*

**Simmons:** I look to the works of the following scholars to ground my students in African-centered perspectives of Black Queer Studies: Sobonfu Somé, Malidoma Patrice Somé, Sekhmet Maat, Herukhuti Williams, bell hooks, Cathy Cohen, E. Patrick Johnson, and Ifi Amadiume. I want to ensure that my students look at themselves historically from the positionalities of themselves and not through the cultural lens of other people and perspectives.

As far as African Diasporic events, the students and I examine Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) and Rocío Cobo-Piñero (2023) who work around the Black Atlantic from a more intersectional perspective. We reimagine how quare people navigated life through enslavement and see the Harlem Renaissance as a re-assertion of quareness to exist and thrive. Additionally, we look at African(a) spiritual practices and their connection to queerness through the work of Johnson (2000) and Conner (2004). Again, every section of my syllabus connects our queerness in cultural/spiritual ways. Finally, we look at the Black Church, Stonewall, the Civil Rights, and Black Power Movements as queered social movements that would not have happened without quare people pushing those movements forward. Over the semester, I highlight iconic quare thinkers such as Audre Lorde, Bayard Rustin, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Zora Neale Hurston. Exposing my students to people, places, and movements that are often minimized allows them to see themselves as agents of Africana history, and not peripheral bystanders. Black Queer Studies/Quare Studies, coupled with Afrocentricity, takes us from the periphery to the center of our culture. It places us back as the gatekeepers of the culture.

**Williams:** I assign many of the same scholars as Simmons including Sekhmet Maat, S. Herukhuti Williams, E. Patrick Johnson, Jafari Allen, Roderick Ferguson, Aimee Meredith Cox, Gloria Wekker, and Savannah Shange. In my course, I try to address the broad categories of lesbian, gay, transgender, and queer experiences as they



present within Black communities, and then delve into topics such as the erotic and the ecstatic; social and physical death; memory; spirituality; compulsory heteronormativity; and fashion.

Like Simmons' course, I aim to equip students with a variety of critical lenses (Afrocentricity, Afro-pessimism, Black Feminism, Queer of Color Critique) to center Black queerness within traditional Black and queer historical moments and contemporary issues. I hope that students will use these readings and approaches to continue centering Africana voices and phenomena in other arenas.

**Question:** *What are the challenges of teaching Black Queer Studies and Afrocentricity at an HBCU/PWI?*

**Simmons:** I had some resistance to teaching Black Queer Studies at my home institution. Not overwhelming resistance, but some resistance, nevertheless. When I first proposed Black Queer Politics, my departmental colleagues were very supportive. However, the administration dropped the class, even though the class enrollment had reached the minimum requirement of ten students. I believe that the administration thought that there was not enough interest to offer the class and felt it was unnecessary. I had to fight to return the class to active status. It was eventually reinstated after the department spoke on my behalf. However, I had to personally reach out to the formerly enrolled students to get them to re-register. Because of this administrative interference, I lost a few interested students. This incident was infuriating, to say the least.

Teaching Afrocentricity is not an issue at my institution, thankfully. Cheyney had Africana Studies in the 1980s, and Gaffin has been at the forefront of bringing Africana Studies back to Cheyney University. We are in the final stages of creating a minor in Africana Studies, and there are three Africana Studies-trained faculty members from Temple University at Cheyney University. So Africological training and study is making its mark at Cheyney.

**Williams:** Many of my students are aware of queer identities, either through their own experiences or through conversations. However, they often cannot address the dimensionality of queer experiences, and they do not think of it as a field of study.

My course may be the first and only place that centers or even mentions Black queer experiences in history and contemporary life. So, there is not only the work of defining Black Queer Studies, but also what comprises Black Studies, Queer Studies, and the realities of class, religion, gender, race, etc.

Moreover, it is a delicate balance to speak authoritatively about the discipline, yet push the existence of scholarly debate, even on sensitive issues. While students understand the reality of disagreement between scholars, the progressive nature of Africana Studies leads them to expect a uniform radical or liberal stance amongst scholars. They may be shocked and disappointed to encounter anti-queer or anti-trans rhetoric in canonical work, often questioning the presence of the work in the course. My role has been to carefully ensure that students understand the context of the scholarly work and including the evolution (if present) of a scholar's perspective over time.

Another challenge I face is the prevailing view among many students, including those who identify as people of color and/or queer, that higher education solely serves job preparation, especially at our expensive private institution. While core requirements maintain a liberal arts focus, this emphasis on career practicality creates a hierarchy within coursework. Classes essential for graduation take priority over humanistic electives that promote grappling with new and unfamiliar concepts. Because my Black Queer Studies course is not required for the core or the major, students must actively seek it out. The majority of courses that explicitly and implicitly address dominant or dominant adjacent gender, sexuality, and class identities rarely touch upon Black and queer experiences. This focus on the status quo is part of the institutional intersectional failure that reinforces the invisibility of marginalized communities, despite calls for diversity and social justice.

**Question:** *How does your syllabus/pedagogy foster a sense of agency in your students and yourself?*

**Simmons:** First, I want my students to see themselves within my syllabus. I wanted them to see themselves in every aspect of Africana life. The divine did not make mistakes when they created us. The mistake was when Western ideas and worldviews worked to eradicate us from existence because they feared our power and our

connection to our culture. My scholarship and the Black Queer Politics course I taught in Spring 2024 works to heal the historical and psychological damage inflicted upon the students who come to my class and provide them tools to look at themselves as not just whole individuals, but whole communities that need each other to survive.

I also want them to see themselves in me as an intersectional Africana scholar who teaches them. I think it is imperative that our students see themselves in us as we mature as scholar-activists in the field. We are still intellectually and personally maturing as human beings. Even though they are in my class, I want my students to see ourselves in conversation with the scholar-activists that we read and discuss in my class. Allen's (2021) work speaks to me in this context. We, as quare people, have always worked to be "perfect" in the eyes of society in order to be accepted within it. Allen's work forces me to look at myself and quare people as imperfect, messy, and beautiful. I also want our students, and myself, to act as works-in-progress in terms of being better human beings, and not for the validation of society at large.

**Williams:** Since I tend to have a heterogeneous student population, I typically employ a multiple-faceted approach to empowering students and fostering agency. Like Simmons, I want my Black queer and Black students to see themselves reflected in the course content. I want them to know that scholarship exists that documents and analyzes their experiences written by people of similar backgrounds. Additionally, I often assign research projects that involve students in the work of recovery and remembrance. Through archival research, content analysis, and close reading, they become active participants in the process of creating and disseminating knowledge about Black queer worlds. For instance, when I taught the course in fall 2023, the final project was "Archival Connections," in which students were tasked with finding artifacts or literature created by Black queer people before 1999. Then they used Black Queer Theory/or Queer of Color Critique published after 2000 to analyze these materials. This assignment allowed students to discover poetry, music, artwork, and editorials, and explore their resonance within 21st-century frameworks. By guiding them to find Black queer ancestors and elders, I hope to instill a sense of belonging and purpose. They can see themselves as descendants and accomplices of a rich and ongoing legacy.

In another way, I see my own agency. As a scholar transitioning into mid-career and middle age, I am increasingly thoughtful about the impact I want to make on scholarship and teaching in the future. My investment in Black futurity and possibility guides how I approach not just how Africana people interact with ideas and technologies deemed futuristic, but also their ability to act upon their own social and cultural development. I feel Black Queer Studies is an exciting location from which to consider what an African-centered future might look like, especially one that embraces and builds on the variations of gender and sexuality that exist today. If we are the ancestors of the future (and we are, despite what dissenting voices have said), then what acts of solidarity, knowledge production, sankofic discernment, and other practices must be implemented to support a future where Africana queer people can be self-aware and empowered to act in ways that ensure the longevity of their community. I agree with Maat's sentiment that future work in Africana Queer Studies "will aid in moving away from white supremacist hegemonic ideals about gender, sex, and sexuality and turn to African ways of knowing, to define and interpret, queer African and diasporan people's divine spirit-filled mission" (Maat 2023, 141). Such work needs to be supported with care and compassion.

**Question:** *What do you think is the future of Afrocentricity and Black Queer Studies?*

**Simmons:** I think the future of Afrocentricity and Black Queer Studies is under constant tension and scrutiny, but it is still bright and hopeful (I have to be). The tension is caused by the conservative push to silence our voices in the academy. Africana/Black Studies and Black Queer Studies work to correct the inaccuracies of told histories that are now under attack in the academy and society due to white fragility and white supremacy. However, I do not place my hope in outside forces to validate and investigate Africana and queer phenomena within our societies. The future of Black Studies and Black Queer Studies resides in those scholars and people who are doing the work of highlighting our contributions and re-orienting our thinking toward a more humane and equitable society. There is ongoing dialogue among scholars of both perspectives to collaborate and support one another, to build in the academy, and on the ground. Our disciplines originate from outside the academy, and we must continue to build maroon communities within universities

and research institutions while continuously building and resisting within the local municipalities, and our political spheres of power.

However, there is still work to be done within the discipline of Africana Studies, especially within Afrocentric/African-centered circles of our discipline. Even though the discipline has become more accepting of queer scholarship, there are still large milieus of heteronormativity and homophobia that festers within our discipline. We, as scholars within the discipline, must continue to confront those milieus of tensions, sometimes with understanding and dialogue, but always with a full-throated denouncement of those harmful ideologies that undermine not just the humanity of queer people, but the vitality of Blackness as a whole. We cannot talk about liberation while calling for the omission and silencing of populations of our people. All people must be at the table. We will never achieve liberation for our people by erasing groups of people for the discourse. We must get there together.

**Williams:** I know I already said some definitive things about the future, but let me add a few more. I think the future of an African-centered Queer Studies is in the examination of spiritual systems, such as IFA, Hoodoo/Conjure, and traditional African spiritual systems. Considering phenomena like the fluidity between the spirit and body, and how that could translate into the fluidity of essence in a person, can inform a more inclusive understanding of Black identity and Black queer individuals. Also, I hope for a Pan-African queer praxis and theory. As Blackness and queerness continue to be attacked within the United States, and globally, the international connections being forged online are fostering a new kind of Pan-Africanism. This novel movement may address oppression, embrace intersectionality, and look at racial/cultural liberation alongside gender and sexual freedoms. But, I say this from the position that I never thought that Africana Studies would not be the homeplace for Black Queer Studies.

However, my optimism is tempered by the realities of the academic landscape. As Kaila Story (2008) points out, Black Queer Studies scholars have been pressured to “leave their sexuality at the door” or prioritize “race over sexual orientation” (55). This has led some young scholars to abandon Africana Studies for departments and disciplines more receptive to their work. Story warns that Africana risks becoming a stagnant discipline dominated by “old Black men” if they continue to neglect new

perspectives (55). Fortunately, younger scholars are no longer willing to be silenced in favor of an idealized African heteronormativity. With Asante's recent focus on the "human," I hope that Afrocentricity has an opportunity to reflect on its historical reliance on a fixed perspective about African gender and sexuality.

## Conclusion

The authors began this conversation by discussing content curation and Afrocentric pedagogy, focusing on Black queer identity at different institutions. However, it developed into a reflection on how we continue to queer Afrocentricity despite its contentious history. Discussing with each other, citing like-minded scholars, and reminiscing with early advocates of Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender courses, became a stark reminder of the struggle for recognition and inclusion of gender and sexual difference within certain Black Studies spaces. This work honors the resilience of those who have cultivated Africana Queer Studies in their scholarship and institutional curricula. On the other hand, it unveils how many queer Afrocentric scholars have used their silence, or refutation of the paradigm, to contend with the ubiquity of revered figures and ideas. These defensive practices may have inadvertently led to a scattering of those with shared interests and experiences. To reckon with this past and look forward, the authors feel a compelling need to call for collaboration—a collective effort to weave together the threads of Afrocentric queer studies—to expand Afrocentricity beyond its heteronormative constraints, and realize its stated mission as an anti-oppression, liberatory framework.

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<sup>1</sup> Quare/Quareness/Quare Studies/Black Studies is centered and defined in the context of Johnson's work (2001) around the liberatory praxis that is Black Queer/Quare Studies. It is different from Queer Studies in that it centers Black/African/Africana intersectional experiences and bodies in order to interpret and theorize the world around them. It is in conversation with Afrocentricity (1990) in terms of agency. Johnson uses the term "Quare" as a signifier of the communal African-cultural knowledge of as a sexual and/or gender individual(s), showing reverence to his Southern grandmother's knowingness of his and others intra-cultural difference.

<sup>2</sup> African/Africana/Black are utilized interchangeably to describe African-descended cultural, historical and sociological, political, and psychological experiences from an Africological standpoint. It is to be looked at within both a diasporic context and continental worldview(s) of African-descended people and practices. It encompasses the sankofic past, developing present, and expansive futures of African-descended people.

<sup>3</sup> "Tea" has a myriad of meanings within Black queer culture. It originates from Black Gay Ballroom culture. Johnson (2008) defines it as telling gossip or truth about a person, situation, or event.

<sup>4</sup> Existence within the networks of the material-structural-institutional forms and subjective conditions. Here, I am referencing the work of Lauren Berlant, who attributes her introduction of the term through Jürgen Habermas. Lauren Berlant. 2022. *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.



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