



Introduction to the Africana Queer Politics and Social Justice Special Issue

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Since our time in graduate school at Howard University, we have been inspired by the work of Mack H. Jones. Jones is a Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Clark Atlanta University, co-author of the foundational textbook *African Americans and the American Political System*, and the first President of the National Conference of Black Political Scientists. He realized that grasping a people's worldview is crucial to comprehending their approach within a social science context. This is because their

worldview shapes how they perceive and describe their current reality, and how they envision and strive to build their future.¹ Our attempt to understand the political realities and endeavors of the Africana queer community stems from our charge and responsibility as Black political scientists to challenge the discipline to recognize the importance of studying the political behavior of Black folks, as well as additional marginalized communities.

In shaping a politic aimed at the liberation of the embodied spirits of Africana queer individuals, we explore an expansiveness of topics related to LGBTQIA+ identities within the context of the unique political challenges and overlapping systems of oppressions that impact this community. As our “Queer Activist Mother” Audre Lorde has taught us, we do not live single-issue lives;² therefore, we recall the importance of speaking up and advocating for our authentic existence. We recognize that remaining silent does not contribute to building inclusive democracies and governmental structures that promote societal change, nor does it advance a just world. In a political climate currently seeking the erasure of diversity, justice, equity, and inclusion, we perceive the necessity of curating a space where our voices can remain visible and a catalyst of strength. By crafting a paradigm that encapsulates the distinct experiences of Africana queer communities, our aim extends beyond societal change. We strive to forge connections across academic fields and disciplines, thereby invoking a collective force that champions the empowerment and liberation of Africana queer individuals. This approach not only enriches our understanding of the Africana queer community, but it amplifies the voices and lived experiences of those at the intersection of Africana heritage and queer identity.

This special issue of *Siyabonana: The Journal of Africana Studies* seeks to begin a discourse that lays the theoretical grounding for what we are calling an *Africana Queer Politic*. Our challenge faced in the broader discipline of Political Science is that the study of politics continues to be predominately taught and presented from a European perspective. As a result, many Black political scientists have centered their work around the Black community in order to study, enhance, and promote people of African descent. Despite these initiatives, the representation of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression remains sparse and limited. Thus, the work presented in this special issue is an attempt to carve out an Africana Queer Politic as a subfield within Political Science. In 1997, Cathy Cohen, a political scientist, began

a conversation in her 1997 published essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," where she critiques the limitations of queer politics and proposes a more transformative approach to understanding queer lives. Cohen argues that queer movements have failed to effectively challenge heteronormativity by reinforcing a simplistic dichotomy between queer and heterosexual identities, and neglecting the intersections of race, class, and gender.³ In keeping with Cohen, this special issue envisions a more inclusive and transformative movement that can effectively challenge dominant power structures and create meaningful social change.

We are interested in a philosophical view that not only centers social justice, but one that is squarely concerned with the politics of those who identify as queer and of Africana descent. By *Africana*, we mean the experiences of homeland African people and Africans in North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe and elsewhere; that is, wherever African people, and their descendants, exist in the world. The usage of an Africana Queer Politic denotes the collective political experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals who are both on the continent of Africa and in the African diaspora. In giving attention to the liberation of Africana queer communities, we seek to give voice to the varying challenges faced by Africana LGBTQIA+ individuals in the form of discrimination, legal protections, and social stigma. We shift the narrative and challenge the claims that homosexuality, and other designations within the spectrum of human sexuality and attraction, is "un-African." We work to actively recover historical evidence and develop the contemporary presence of queer identities in academic scholarship. We aim to disrupt misguided stereotypes often causing harm within the community, create sacred and safe spaces for artistic-expression, self-articulation, and acceptance, and advocate for the rights and freedoms of all who exist in the Africana queer community. This community is as diverse and complex as the array of cultures, histories, and socio-political factors existing in our society. Hence, we embrace a multifaceted framing that recognizes the complex interplay of various identities. An Africana Queer Politic goes beyond analyzing sexuality in isolation by encompassing the nuanced interconnection of race, gender, and class within the broader Africana experience. By doing so, we recognize that Africana queerness is a deeply

interwoven lived reality that demands examination through multiple lenses and requires a holistic understanding across diverse cultural and historical contexts.

This special issue furthermore contributes to the ongoing dialogue in Black Queer Studies, Africana Studies, Black Politics, and Black LGBTQIA+/Queer Politics. The tradition of scholar-activism has been characterized by resilience, innovation, and a commitment to social justice. These scholars have significantly shaped their perspective fields and have made significant contributions to Black queer scholarship, while advocating for intersectionality, and challenging traditional paradigms in academia and activism. Hence, the purpose of this special issue is to create more scholarly solidarity in researching culturally specific approach(es) to queer liberation and political engagement. In keeping with the Black scholar-activist tradition, we build upon the theories and activism of writers such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, and Marquis Bey; sociologists, Patricia Hill Collins and Juan Battle; theologians, Kelly Brown Douglas and Horace Griffith; and African sexuality studies scholar, Sylvia Tamale.

The special issue begins with “Sensing Difference Otherwise: Seniority and the Sensorial Constitution of Gender in (Post)colonial Ghana” by Godfried Asante, Lore/tta LeMaster, and Angel Maxine, who seeks to challenge the presumptions of gender as a primary lens for examining social relations in queer intercultural communication studies in a (post)colonial context of Ghana, West Africa. Through interviews with Ghanaian transgender musician, Angel Maxine, the authors examine not only how they navigate a hostile environment towards same-gender-loving and gender conforming folks, but challenge how culturally specific nuances of queerness and transness are viewed in a transnational context. Benmun Damul and Hazel Carolyne King further delve into the impact of a hostile environment through the lens of public health in several African countries in “The Effect of LGBTQ+ Criminalization and Structural Stigma on Public Health Outcomes in Africa.” The authors posit that African nations have the potential to make substantial contributions to the progress of not only human rights, but public health results, if they celebrate queer culture and local queer identities, and prioritize and appreciate the voices of Africana queer individuals.

Black queer love is, indeed, a radical love. Utilizing the works of Audre Lorde and maree brown, SavySavz Elahian explores Black sapphic love through a complex

triple consciousness – being Black, queer, and American. “Black Sapphic Love Lessons: An Exploration of Audre Lorde’s Theory of the Erotic,” seeks to offer a new approach to understanding love within the Black queer community, one that prioritizes Black queer joy, is intersectional, and is rooted in precolonial Africa. “Fated Portrayals of Black Non-Monogamy (and Their Harmful Consequences)” by Justin Clardy examines Black consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. Through songs, television shows, movies, and media portrayals, Clardy argues that portrayals of Black CNM relationships often reinforce harmful negative stereotypes (i.e. labeling a person in a CNM relationship as a player, side-chicks, etc.) that fail to capture the diversity and validity of these relationships. Further, these portrayals can have a disproportionate psychological toll on Black non-monogamists by obscuring the ability of non-monogamists to understand their lives and loves in a social landscape dominated by the unargued assumption that love is something only befitting marriage, and marriage-like relationships, that preclude non-monogamous intimate formations.

The politics surrounding the aesthetics, images, and media portrayal of Africana queer communities includes a rich analysis of the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and visual culture. Through three distinct, yet interconnected, lenses, contributors to this session of the journal speak to the necessity of advocating for more inclusive representations and challenges systematic bias in the visibility of LGBTQIA+ identities. In “Reverberations of a Black (Queer) Woman’s Gaze in the Art of Mickalene Thomas and Deana Lawson,” Glynnis Reed-Conway expands on bell hooks’ concept of the “oppositional gaze” by examining queer Black female spectatorship through compelling visual narratives. Arguably, Black women stand at the core of the evocative compositions of Thomas and Lawson, giving space for queer Black female visual pleasure, while refining and maneuvering the white male gaze. Monique Gamble, in “Black Women’s Queer Relationships on TV and Film: An Empowering and Curious Narrative,” speaks to the revolutionary impact of Black sapphic narratives in mainstream media, highlighting their ability to challenge societal norms, foster inclusivity, and promote intersectional understanding. By centering queer Black women’s experiences, these stories disrupt dominant perspectives and redefine cultural narratives. These narratives serve as catalysts for personal and political reimagining, ultimately contributing to the ongoing discourse

that empowers marginalized communities beyond traditional limitations. “Strands of Acceptance: The Impact of Societal Norms and Hair Biases on Black LGBTQ Women,” delves into societal expectations and biases surrounding hair for Black and LGBTQ women during formal events, particularly weddings, revealing the pervasive influence of Eurocentric beauty standards and heteronormative expectations. Gabrielle Smith’s study uncovers significant impacts of colorism and texturism on hairstyle choices, especially for Black LGBTQ women facing compounded pressures, and advocates for more inclusive beauty standards and policies to promote acceptance and authenticity.

Discussions about the complexity of what it means to embrace African heritage and theoretical approaches, while navigating the terrain of queerness, attest to the resilience of the human spirit. Jennifer Williams and Matthew Simmons, two queer-identifying Black scholars trained in Afrocentricity, give insight into how Black scholars reconcile Afrocentricity with queer identity in “Knowing our African and Queer Home: A Conversation about Afrocentricity and Black Queer Studies.” Williams and Simmons explore the creation of a Black Queer Studies syllabus and the curation of Afrocentric queer scholarship, while addressing the challenges of creating safe space within Afrocentric and Black queer perspectives. The authors advocate for an Afrocentric approach to Black Queer Studies that is both reverent and critical, recognizing the harm of homophobic rhetoric embedded within Afrocentric discourse. An interview by Maryam Abdallah with Christiana Afotey explores the complex experiences of a first-generation Ghanaian American lesbian navigating her identity within a deeply heteronormative Ghanaian culture. Highlighting Afotey’s struggles to reconcile her queer identity with her cultural background, “My Story, My Truth: An LGBTQ Individual's Journey of Navigating Two Cultures,” provides personal anecdotes and reflections amidst societal and legal obstacles faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in Ghana, West Africa. This issue ends with a review of *The Race to Be Myself* by Caster Semenya, the South African middle-distance runner with two Olympic gold medals and multiple world championships. Hannah Borenstein describes the compelling memoir and explains how Semenya became a controversial figure in athletics due to her difference in sex development (DSD), leading to a ban from the 800m race by World Athletics amid debates over fairness in women's sports.

We hope that this special issue will present a spectrum of Africana queer scholarship that spotlights the necessity of producing perspectives that push for a more inclusive understanding of Africana identities, sexualities, and social justice. The emerging area of Africana Queer Politics will contribute to this vital discourse by presenting works at the intersections of Africana queer scholarship, activism, and lived experience. Our desire is to contribute and engage in a queer politic that is rooted in Africana experiences, practices, and perspectives, while simultaneously enriching global understandings of gender, sexuality, and human rights.

Notes

¹Jones, Mack H. *Knowledge, Power, and Black Politics: Collected Essays*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013.

²Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Revised edition. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007.

³Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437-465.