

Making Place in Hostile Space: What are the Limits and Radical Possibilities of Arts-based Activism Utilized by Queer Racialized Activists in Britain Today?

by

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the various formulations of art-based activism being utilized by queer racialized artists and activists working in Britain today. Much of the scholarship mapping queer arts-based activism has failed thus far to position race as a key point of analysis; this thesis looks to contribute to thinking otherwise. Analyzing a historic genealogy of race-based arts activism in Britain such as the 1979 formation of the BLK Arts Group and the works of Rasheed Araeen, I look at the path that was paved for the queer racialized, politicized works we have seen take rise over the past decade. Further I make global links to the historic politicized arts-activism enacted by Black women in the Americas. Confronted by the erasure from both geographic and archival space, I argue that queer people of colour in Britain are “making place” in hostile space while ensuring our rightful place in the archive being made from the history of this moment. Key questions that have guided this research include: what are the possibilities such arts-based activism is enabling? What are the limitations of the activism and how are these being mediated by the activists I look at? What spaces are they operating in and how are they utilizing art as a medium to enact social change? What various forms is the activism I analyze taking on? I find that collectivist formations are the preferred way of working similarly, building and fostering community a key factor underpinning both the process and outcomes of the arts-based activism I look at. I employ the literature of scholars working across a diverse range of fields such as art history, performance studies, critical race theory, queer and gender studies, and sociology to aid my thinking. The inherently interdisciplinary nature of arts-based activism is reflected by the inability to remain in one field when analyzing the various manifestations of the activism which, this thesis argues, is a core strength of employing the use of art in activism.

Lay Summary

This thesis looks at the various formulations of art-based activism being utilized by queer racialized artists and activists working in Britain today. Much of the scholarship mapping queer arts-based activism has failed thus far to position race as a key point of analysis; this thesis looks to contribute to thinking otherwise. Analyzing a historic genealogy of race-based arts activism in Britain such as the 1979 formation of the BLK Arts Group and the works of performance artist Rasheed Araeen, I look at the path that was paved for the queer racialized, politicized works we have seen take rise in the UK over the past decade. Moving on to analyze contemporary examples, I look at the multitude of ways queer people of colour are using arts-based activism, looking at what spaces they are operating in and why art continues to be a popular tool used by such demographics.

Preface

This thesis is the original and independent work of the author Jade Pollard-Crowe.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Lay Summary	iv
Preface.....	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Abbreviations	viii
Acknowledgements	ix
Dedication	x
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.2 Review of the literature.....	3
1.2.1 Understanding Britain as a terrain for queer racialized arts-based activism	3
1.2.2 Arts-based activism and the academy.....	12
1.2.2.1 Sites of performativity	17
1.2.2.1.1 Hybridity and the performative role of the hyphen.....	21
1.2.2.1.2 Standpoint theory as a framework for analyzing queer performance	26
1.3 The role of representation as it pertains to racialized bodies.....	30
1.3.1 Chapter outline.....	35
Chapter 2: Queer of Colour Formations, Space and Place.....	37
2.1 Space and place: Who is cast as an insider and who is outcast?.....	41
2.1.1 Rainbow Noir: A critical intervention in the city of Manchester	47
Chapter 3: Performance, Performativity and QPOC	63
3.1 Refusing a universalizing of histories of cultural expression: The Cocoa Butter Club 68	

Chapter 4: Collective Communal Existence: Finding Your Way in the Academy.....	90
4.1 Arts-based activism: An alternative graduation.....	93
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	110
Bibliography	113

List of Abbreviations

BME: Black and Minority, Ethnic.

LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender.

LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.

POC: People of Colour.

QPOC: Queer People of Colour.

QTIBPOC: Queer, Trans, Intersex, Black People and People of Colour.

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Dedication

*For my mother who always believes in and inspires me to pursue my passions and
keep up the fight*

Chapter 1: Introduction

Activism is an engagement with the hauntings of history, a dialogue between the memories of the past and the imaginings of the future manifested through the acts of our own present yearnings.

It is an encounter with the ghosts that reside within and inhabit the symbolic and geographic spaces that shape our worlds (Rodríguez, 2003, p.37).

My research is concerned with evaluating the conditions under which queer racialized feminist arts-based activists create their work in Britain. This research led me to focus primarily on urban landscapes, specifically the cities of London and Manchester. My case studies are contemporary, all commencing in the mid-late 2000s. I ask: what are the possibilities such arts-based activism are enabling? What are the limitations of the activism and how are these limitations being mediated by the activists I look at? How is it such artists in Britain are carving a space for themselves within a historically exclusionary terrain while ensuring mainstream culture and art platforms do not capitalize on or tokenize them? What spaces are they operating in and *how* are they utilizing art as a medium to enact social change? What various forms does the activism I analyze take on? These key questions have guided my research and are interwoven throughout each chapter. Interrogating space and place has been an essential aspect of my research. Queer and Ethnic studies scholar Fatima El-Tayeb (2011/2012) speaks to the importance of space when she delineates:

The experience of always being out of place – in nation, community, family, club or classroom – produces locally grounded space making as a necessary strategy of survival; be it in temporarily occupying and claiming hostile or indifferent spaces or through

excavating a local genealogy of QPOC activism that continues to be excluded from the archives, even those devoted to reclaiming suppressed histories. (p. 773)

Further, I ask, why does arts-based activism continue to be a popular medium among queer racialized feminists? I argue for the significance of arts-based activism as a way of radically furthering the cause of QPOC and countering continuing oppressions; as a method of bridging the gap between the academy and activist, grass-roots community organizations; as a means of reconfiguring the parameters of representation both inside and outside of queer communities; and as a way to redefine the former expectation placed upon racialized artists to produce works strictly identified with and not deviating from their ancestral heritage. A key feature of arts-based activism I identify is its inherently interdisciplinary nature. Often drawing from various fields of scholarship, popular culture and historical and contemporary events, I argue for its ability to contend with the multifaceted complexities of a lot of the major problems we continue to face.

My thesis topic was initially prompted by my recognition that the overwhelming majority of existing literature focusing on queer arts-based activism in the UK has failed thus far to position race as a critical point of analysis and secondly, by my concern that as artists functioning in a neo-liberal, capitalist society, are we not limited in our ability to function as we are not immune from oppressive existing structures that in turn dictate where we exhibit, how we are read, how we obtain funding and who pays attention? My research has personal significance. I am a British-Jamaican woman who identifies as both queer and a lesbian. This embodied hyphenated reality came to inform my art practice and thinking more broadly. How I navigate space and, important to this thesis, how I relate to art and “art spaces” has been informed by my hyphenated identity. Through the use of literature, media analysis, and my own standpoint as a

queer racialized artist, I analyze the apparatus utilized by my case-studies with a particular focus on installation, live, and performance practices. Key areas of exploration for me include theories of performativity as they pertain to queer identities, and the interaction between scholarship and performance. Additionally, I explore and question the role of audiences who are privy to the performances I analyze. Formations of queer racialized arts-based activism, modes of representation and the hybrid/hyphenated identities inherent to QPOC are further concepts integral to this thesis. The literature review maps the historic conditions that have led to the contemporary arts-based activism I review in the main body of the thesis: I look at early race, feminist and queer activism both internally and exceeding the UK as a way to situate the present in a far-reaching genealogy. I find it important to make the linkage between the local and global, for neither the historic nor contemporary activism transpiring in the UK or elsewhere occurs in a vacuum. Additionally, the review is a means of introducing and familiarizing my reader with the concepts and concerns they can expect to encounter throughout the thesis.

1.2 Review of the literature

1.2.1 Understanding Britain as a terrain for queer racialized arts-based activism

Deviating from the dominant North American narratives of racial and queer activism, my research looks to contribute to the ongoing project of highlighting the significant work activists in the UK continue to execute. I will use this section to outline why I have chosen Britain as a geographic case study when appraising arts-based activism by queer racialized artists. To do this, it is helpful to delineate the historical trajectory of racialized arts-activism that has enabled the queer racialized feminist art practices currently taking place throughout Britain. I have selected case-studies I consider turning points in the politicized art history of the UK. I look at the development of arts activism, finding collective formations to be a successful way of operating.

Further, I highlight the aesthetic choices made by the artists while identifying what claims were being made via their radical practices.

Following the Second World War and the dispersal of the British Empire, migration into the UK from Britain's former colonies was extremely prevalent throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The 1948 'British Nationality Act' enabled all from the Commonwealth to migrate to Britain with minimal limits. As finance in infrastructure and the National Health Service was deployed from government to help rebuild the country, many migrants came to aid filling the labour shortage occurring at the time. That year witnessed the first of the "Windrush generation" arrive into Britain. Originally comprised of around 500 Caribbean migrants, they arrived into the UK via a former troopship known as the Empire Windrush. The next two decades saw around 300,000 West Indians arrive into Britain, who subsequently became known as the Windrush generation. Beside those from the Caribbean "came some 300,000 people from India, 140,000 from Pakistan, and more than 170,000 from various parts of Africa" (Lowe, 2020). The influx in migration sparked nationalist sentiment in many and the late-1950s bore witness to high racial tensions culminating in a series of riots "most famously in 1958 in Notting Hill and Nottingham" (Lowe, 2020). While eye-witness accounts differ in detail, all confirm the riots were sparked by the sight of a minor romantic dispute which occurred between a Black West Indian man and a white Swedish woman. A group of young white men attempted to intervene, despite the woman's protest at the intervention. By the end of the following evening, a mob of over 200 white men rampaged through the streets of Notting Hill armed with weapons and shouting racist slurs. The violence which ensued sent a clear message communicating interracial relationships were not accepted on the streets of Britain and the Windrush generation could expect to face violence if they chose to ignore this belief.

A good place to commence delving into the archive of Britain's arts-based activism surrounds the arrival of Rasheed Araeen to the UK in 1964, for his performance works came to respond to the very circumstances I make reference to above. This has been saliently documented by curator Courtney J. Martin in her 2010 article, "Rasheed Araeen, Live Art, and Radical Politics in Britain." Araeen arrived in Britain in 1964. As a minimalist sculptor, he found quick success and was able to live as a practicing artist, eventually winning the highly acclaimed John Moores Prize in 1969.¹ As noted by Martin, the terrain of Britain had become increasingly xenophobic, witnessing the notoriously divisive anti-immigration speech given by Right-wing politician Enoch Powell the year preceding Rasheed's award: "Powell's remarks framed that year for Britain and set in motion a complex discourse of violence, prohibitive legislation, and xenophobia that would be inextricable from immigration for at least another decade" (Martin, 2010, p. 107). Powell's speech was a direct counter to the Race Relations Act of 1968, a parliamentary act making it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services to a person on the grounds of colour, race, ethnic or national origins in Great Britain. While the British government, under pressure, appeared to crack down on all forms of racial discrimination, the end of the decade also witnessed them introduce a variety of laws limiting immigration. As Lowe has stated, "The most significant of these was the Immigration Act of 1971, which decreed

¹ The dominant art trends of 1960s Britain included bold, striking sculpture such as the works of Anthony Caro and equally bold Op art which flamboyantly challenged the former steel sculpture, Bridget Riley being a distinguished pioneer of the movement. Postwar debates around figuration and abstraction were key to the complex sculptural developments Britain witnessed through the 1960s. Additionally, while many associate Pop art with New York, British pop artists including Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton and Peter Blake were producing works intricately connected to the energetic music scene progressing through 1960s Britain. Abstract art continued through the decade, conceptual art was devised, and performance and video installations began to pave the way for their notoriety as mediums intrinsic to the 1970s. For further reading, see Sophie Bowness and Clive Phillpot (1995) *Britain at the Venice biennale, 1895-1995*. This important book offers a year by year catalogue of British participants in the Venice Biennale; this is exceptionally useful in exemplifying the dominant British art trends as they progressed throughout the decades.

Commonwealth immigrants did not have any more rights than those from other parts of the world” (Lowe, 2020). This marked the end of the Windrush generation. The racism which defined Araeen’s lived experience came to be reflected in the art world’s interaction with him, highlighting their refusal to separate his work from his cultural identity. It became an impossibility for such depreciation not to inform his practice, taking him from minimalism to live/performance art. When addressing this transition, he writes:

But there came a time when I strongly felt that I should also express other things which had to do with my social experience of living in Britain, I found "minimalism” limiting. So I had to break out of its formalist constraints. I had to find a new language which would maintain my position as a modernist (or an avant-gardist) within the framework of historical developments, and at the same time which would allow me to express my lived experience. (Hanru, 1995, as cited in Martin, 2010)

1977 saw his performance *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)*, an unapologetically defiant performance wherein he confronted both the racial violence taking place in Britain and racially motivated artworld tendencies. Further, he became a member of S.P.A.C.E. (Space, Provision, Artists, Cultural and Educational), a London community-based studio program set up in 1968 by distinguished artists Bridget Riley and Peter Sedgley, additionally becoming a member of arts-activist group Artists for Democracy (AFD). Through these affiliations, he was able to collaborate with other immigrant arts-activists, notably John Dugger (US), David Medalla (Philippines), and Cecilia Vicuna (Chile). The group posed challenges to Britain’s hostility and drew comparisons between international struggles and the

barriers facing immigrants in Britain. A key critique underpinning Araeen's work was the codification of all non-white bodies as "Black."² As Martin describes:

By subsuming the ethnic or national boundaries of its former colonies in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere into a catchall phrase, the term did not function solely as a racial category. Rather, black encompassed a nationalist binary: black was, simply, the opposite of English, which was white. (Martin, 2010, p.110)

Collectivist formations were central to the composition of arts-based activism at this time, "thus, art activism among these groups represented an attempt to build a network of other art activists and immigrant artists to circumvent the restrictive boundary of Englishness" (Martin, 2010, p.110). Utilizing socio-economic struggles, Britain's police violence, political public action restaging the streets and the rise of the National Front as subject material, arts-activists used the body as a site of protest culminating in often rough and intentionally uncomfortable aesthetic formulations. As Martin states, "By all accounts, most live art in Britain was purposefully rough, an aesthetic tendency that made its separation from painting and sculpture, on one level, and theater, on another, clear" (Martin, 2010, p.114). Notably Araeen was one of the few Black live artists in the UK. He used this fact as subject material, depicting the intense scrutiny and abjection Black bodies were subject to in Britain.

A further crucial moment in Britain's politicized art history which, as argued by Black Studies scholar Celeste Marie Bernier, helped set the stage for the contemporary arts-activism we

² When speaking of a culture, race, ethnicity or a group of people, I strongly advocate for capitalizing the name such as the 'B' in 'Black'. Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a colour. This point has been made for years by linguists, academics and activists. This rule is often not upheld by the publishing industry and is in fact disputed by members within POC communities. For purposes of originality, I have not amended any quotes, thus you may note an inconsistency between my use of "Black" and original sources' use of "black."

witness today, concerns the 1979 formation of the BLK Arts Group in Wolverhampton. The BLK Arts Group, a collective comprised of notable Black British artists including Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper, Derek Rodney, Sonja Boyce, Eddie Chambers and Marlene Smith, was a group committed to a radical Black thematic. The group's work encompassed concepts such as Black womanhood, state violence, and colonial legacy, and utilized the past to reimagine futurity. In her 2011-2012 essay "'Save Our Shit. Save Our Souls. Save Our Struggle': Politics, Protest and Experimentation in the BLK Arts Group Exhibition," Bernier reviews two archival exhibitions, one of which I myself was fortunate to visit in Sheffield, UK.³ Both pay homage to the group, excavating what arguably continues to be an untold history. When assessing the implications and definition of what constitutes "Black art," artist and critic Keith Piper writes, "I believe Black-Art to be art which responds directly to the issues and ideas surrounding the Black condition and collectivizing perspectives of a Black person" (Bernier, 2013, p. 515). Politicized in stance, "Piper fought to establish this movements commitment not to an art for art's sake ethos but to a radicalized and protest led aesthetic" (Bernier, 2013, p. 515). While the aesthetics of the group's works were often unapologetically overt and candid, the BLK Arts Group were acutely aware of the risks and tendency to portray the Black body as a site of victimization available for consumption and to be sensationalized, and thus, agency and hope can be found in many of their works. An example here is the work of Marlene Smith. *Sugar Baby All the Time* (1987) saw the artist utilize a variety of materials commonly found in the home to sculpt and paint a portrait of her mother. Inside a recycled wooden frame, Smith divided the mirrored surface into three

³ The article makes reference to BLK member Lubaina Himid's show *Thin Black Line(s)* displayed at London's Tate Britain from August 2011 – April 2012. Additionally to curator Louisa Brigg's exhibition, *The BLK Art Group* was shown between August 2011 – Spring 2012 at Graves Gallery, Sheffield.

rectangular sections. The first panel depicts her mother; her eyes look out at the viewer and her skin is almost completely whitened out by the use of sugar. The middle panel is smeared with white matter; no figure is present. While the suggestion of her mother's demise at the hands of white racist powers is evoked, I read power from the ghostly pane not appearing empty as it suggests we cannot be fully eradicated. Bernier suggests this panel communicates that "Black women's lives remain beyond the pale of dominant forms of memorialization" (Bernier, 2019, p.95). The final section is comprised of reproduced photographic fragments of Smith's mother, her eyes downcast, strongly differing from the first panel. On top of the faded photographs, Smith has written about her recognition that artistic materials such as oils, wood, clay or plaster have failed to bring the bodies and faces of Black women to life. When appraising the work Bernier asserts:

Smith's use of sugar carries the symbolic weight not only of domestic labour but of slavery on the grounds that sugar production was integral to the transatlantic trade and, as Smith herself emphasises, to plantation life in the Caribbean.

For Smith, sugar functions not only as a touchstone for displaced maternal ancestries but also as a metonymic signifier for the bodies and, by extension, the lives and deaths of black women, children and men bought and sold over centuries.

Furthermore, the use of a British branded cleaning agent shores up Smith's protests against ongoing black female labour as undertaken not only in the Americas and the Caribbean during slavery but also as a result of its powerful afterlife within the United Kingdom on the grounds that widespread discrimination has continued to result in limited employment opportunities for Black British women and men. As she insists, however, Smith's is no dystopian vision of a "dejected people" or a "degraded womanhood."

Smith uses icing sugar in this work to foreground black female strategies of resistance by emphasising continuities of baking traditions and rituals of food preparation [emphasis added]. (2013, p. 517)

The group saw their work as politically educative which Piper addresses, stating, “the role of my art is to inform, educate, stimulate and agitate” (Bernier, 2013, p. 51). Further, while concerned with fighting for their rightful place in the history books of Britain, the group were in no way concerned with a rejection of their ancestral roots, which they viewed as a way to subvert the Eurocentric values perpetuated by the discourse of art history. Piper maintains, “I am also interested in the development of a Black visual aesthetic which seeks to establish links between contemporary Black-Art and traditional African Art, whilst subverting Western aesthetic and cultural domination” (Arts Council England, as cited in Bernier, 2013, p. 522).

It has been forty years since the group’s formation, yet only in this past decade do we witness the “artworld” and British society more broadly give credit and “adequate” recognition to the group. Original BLK Art Group member Lubaina Himid has received deserved success and notoriety, having been awarded an MBE (Member of the British Empire) in 2010 for “services to Black women” and winning the Turner Prize in 2017. While this is encouraging, the lack of previous and current recognition highlights the artworld’s inability to adequately engage with Black British art.⁴ As Bernier argues:

Repeatedly downplaying black artists’ self-reflexive engagement with irony, ambiguity and a multiplicity of meaning, many critics have remained locked in excessively literalized

⁴ It has been announced that original BLK member Sonia Boyce has been selected to represent Great Britain in the 2021 Venice Biennale. In a statement, the artist enthuses: “You could have knocked me down with a feather when I got the call to tell me I had been chosen ... it was like a bolt out of the blue” (Rae, 2020). Her surprise perhaps hints to the erasure and lack of previous recognition Black British art has elicited thus far.

interpretations by failing to give due weight to the existence of a multifaceted and longstanding, if politically and aesthetically marginalized, Black British visual arts tradition (2013, p.522).

My focus until this point has solely been on race and immigration, for the intersection of race and sexuality/queer gender identification presently being exhibited in Britain is of a contemporary nature. Of course, by this I do not imply its creation to be contemporary but, rather, its public reception. As recalled by journalist Caroline Roux, “curators like Sandy Nairne at the ICA dared to put on a Robert Mapplethorpe show in 1983 (it got closed down, but not before it had opened a few eyes)” (Roux, 2013). While the exhibition focused on Mapplethorpe, an American artist, this example nevertheless demonstrates the terrain racialized homosexual and or homoerotic work was entering. Notably, 2018 witnessed *BBZ BLK BK: Alternative Graduation Show*. In recognition of the exclusionary, often hostile terrains queer Black artists enter into, the founders of Black British Collective BBZ and racialized arts-activist group *sorryyoufeeluncomfortable* (SYFU) collaborated, hosting an alternative grad show to “provide a space for artists to be their fullest selves in the presentation of their work, and for audiences to view their work in a space that does not pathologize or other their identities” (Clarke-Brown, 2018). The show, held in South London’s Copeland Gallery, was open for 10 recently graduated queer artists of Black ancestry to exhibit their works. Though having a queer focus, one is able to observe the influence of the historic arts-activism referenced earlier in this chapter, while the collaborative nature speaks to Araeen’s experience with S.P.A.C.E. Further, the collective formations of BBZ and SYFU is reminiscent of the BLK Arts Group – indeed, I read the title of the show to be a nod towards the group. I will explore the show and arts-activist collectives in more depth later in this thesis but my aim here is to demonstrate why this research project is both timely and important. Queer racialized arts-activists are continuing to claim space and counter

exclusionary attitudes while shaping the landscape of Britain and, as such, I argue the literature on this topic needs to reflect this, a project to which this thesis looks to contribute.

1.2.2 Arts-based activism and the academy

It can be said that practicing artists may themselves not wish to engage with art theory; however, art theory as a discourse relies on the production of art in order to theorize. As such, I want to make clear that many queer individuals and performers may not read queer, critical race or feminist theory, but there is nevertheless a historic and contemporary interaction between the academy, scholarship, and activist practices that I will outline below. Performance and lesbian theorist Sue-Ellen Case, in her influential book *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies*, published in 2009, maps the meeting of scholarship and embodied realities beginning with an analysis of how feminist activism stirred an awakening of consciousness within the academy, calling for the creation of feminist studies. Elucidating on how the two inform each other, Case writes:

Feminist studies do not imagine their base as situated within a particular scholarly tradition of reading and writing. They did not develop from within disciplines, or even across disciplines. Instead, feminist studies resulted from activist challenges to the very institutionalization of knowledge. They made their way onto campus, or, rather re-made curricular, pedagogical, and scholarly practices in order to accommodate their goals.

Thus, springing from activism, feminist studies, like studies of performance imagine their ground in embodied actions performed, somehow, socially. (2009, p. 101)

Case (2001) notes that “within feminism, the relationship to the activist movement significantly altered the object and structure of scholarly discourse” (pp. 145 - 146). While acknowledging that this relationship has changed since the 1970s, Case argues that an

interweaving of these projects continues. Case further contends that the crossing over and interaction between embodied realities and scholarship transcends notions of interdisciplinarity, asserting that, “the ever-more proximate relations between gender and performance yield both a new philosophical inquiry and a more encompassing sense of what might constitute performance” (Case, 2001, p. 146).

Indeed, the parameters of what constitutes performance have widened since the 1970s and additionally what constitutes activism has become less defined. I read the performances I encounter in queer spaces as activist interventions in our understanding of gendered, racial and sexual realities. Case maintains a positive perspective while delineating the intermingling of scholarship, activism and performance, extending this to contend that a move away from a strict emphasis on disciplines incites a positive break from patriarchal ways of knowing.

I stringently believe in the meeting of the corporeal and discursive as being a site of productivity that allows for cultural and formerly “othered” ways of understanding to enjoy the same affirmation that “traditional” forms of western scholarship have. However, I argue that there continues to be a gap between the academy and social sites of activism, specifically, but not limited to, grass-roots organizations and queer racialized arts-based activists. While I believe that it is arts-based activism that holds the potential to bridge this gap, as the early feminist movement met with and radically altered the academy, I recognize the ostracization and tokenism many queer and/or racialized arts-based activists continue to face from the academy. In their 2016 book, *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, queer feminist art historians Amelia Jones and Erin Silver include a set of conversations between performance artist and scholar Lisa Newman, queer Black performance activist Vaginal Davis, and queer photographer and activist Del LaGrace Volcano. Outlining the focus of the interviews, Newman

asserts that the primary research question emerging from the preliminary conversations was: “what has the academizing of ‘queer,’ ‘feminism,’ and ‘art history’ done for you?” (Jones & Silver 2016). In the preface to the interviews, Newman notes that both Davis and Volcano expressed certain “concerns about art world tendencies toward favouritism and exclusivity, a wariness towards classism, and the harsh realities of economic disparity between the cultural professionals who direct the art market, and the artists themselves” (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 331). As outlined earlier in my introduction, the socio-economic conditions of the oppressive capitalist society we function within are a pressing concern for me when querying the positionality of queer racialized arts-based activists and further, its bearing on artistic production. While archives are presented as knowledge sources for us to mine, cite and expand upon, little criticality is given to considering how we position the artist as subject within conversations occurring within the academy, and further, to what end the artist benefits from the archives academics and historians create. Initially, Volcano delineates an appreciation for being “outside” of the institution, enjoying the lack of constraint this position offers while still maintaining the ability to collaborate with key academics such as Jack Halberstam, Ulrika Dahl, Jay Prosser, and Paul B. Preciado. S/he notes that “the cross-fertilization between art/activism and academia have been important for all of us” (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 335), alluding, here, to a productive site of a cross informing dialogue.⁵ However, s/he adds that “of course I am not a beneficiary of a steady income, or actually any income at all, for the most part” (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 335). Given Volcano’s presence in curricular materials across disciplines, I think back to the

⁵ You’ll note that she/he and her/his are the pronouns I have used for Volcano; this is intentionally what is most commonly found in texts and interviews. In a 2019 interview, Volcano stated “Both my partner of 13 years and our two kids ... also identify as non-binary, but our pronouns are deliberately all over the place” (Bainbridge, 2019).

referencing I did of Volcano during my degree in Fine Art in the UK, and the paradox s/he nods towards is one I believe the institution needs to take very seriously. Indeed, Volcano details the 2009 incident in Britain regarding lecturer Simon Burgess of East Surrey College who was threatened with disciplinary action after recommending a student research Volcano's practice. However, the shock for Volcano came not from the position the institution assumed, proclaiming his/her practice to be "too pornographic" but, rather, Volcano was previously unaware that she/he held a globally renowned practice. Here, we can see that while the melding of academia and arts-based activism continues to offer new and important avenues of potential, the academy arguably needs to support this interaction via accountability and reciprocity.

Davis, who describes herself as an "outsider artist," alludes to how this could come to fruition when she details the pleasure received each time she's been invited to be a visiting artist or deliver a workshop. This, while obviously remunerated, makes a deeper contribution, for it invites the artist into the academy to help shape conversations within discourse. While Davis is explicit in her belief that one cannot dismantle the academy while functioning within its structures—I think here to Audre's Lorde's assertion "the master's tools will never dismantle the masters house"—Davis addresses the potential of those within the academy to deploy their knowledge outside and, in turn, absorb new knowledge and be shaped from external practice.⁶

She states:

⁶ What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?" When speaking on the absolute necessity to accept, embrace and work with differences among women, not to simply tolerate them or assume a homogenous front, Lorde asks these provocative questions. Exploring academic feminists' failure to include othered women, in this case poor Black lesbians, on the grounds that they either can't find us or know too little about us, Lorde reminds us this is a simple distraction. A distraction to occupy us with playing with the master's tools, taking on the labour of educating others as opposed to furthering our own positions and holding those who have the time and privilege to educate themselves to account. To read Lorde's speech and other important works by her, consult: (1984) *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*.

Some academics are good as curators, like Amelia Jones when she curated the radical series ‘Theorizing Queer Identities’ that brought me to the University of Manchester for six weeks in 2005. Others even make good performers. Lecturing is a type of performance, and I respect anyone who not only just writes about performance and live art but puts their penis where their mouth is so to speak. (Jones & Silver, p. 337, 2016)

In Davis’s speaking to the experiential nature of being the performer, I also read this to highlight the potential for something “other” to manifest when performance and academic praxis cross paths. In her 2017 doctoral dissertation, “Toward a Transdisciplinary Model for Social Change: Feminist Art Research, Practice and Activism,” Suzanne Van Rossenberg advocates for our understanding of the importance of research, practice, and activism to intersect in accordance with our understanding of the importance of “intersectionality” as a lens to activate inclusive social change.⁷ Rossenberg, who holds a queer feminist art practice herself, argues that as many of the major problems we face across the globe are not created by one factor or discipline alone, “disciplines need to be transgressed to facilitate complex problem solving” (Leavy 2011, as cited in, Rossenberg, 2017, p.25). Examples she provides, which demonstrate the success of a transdisciplinary approach, focus on activists who also have academic backgrounds, and on artists who exit the art world, taking their former experience and entering into other disciplines. Van Rossenburg further emphasizes the importance of a critique of neo-liberalism and, by

⁷ Intersectionality is a term American lawyer and civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw coined in 1989; however, the meaning has its roots in far earlier Black feminist theory. Intersectionality is a prism for understanding the ways multiple forms of oppressions and inequalities interweave to create unique obstacles and discrimination. For example, Black feminism has long argued that the discrimination faced by Black women is a combination of racism, sexism, and often classism; it cannot be read through just one lens. The term has been usurped and misused by dominant groups and discourses both inside and outside of the academy and has thus left some to feel the term has lost its meaning.

extension, capitalism as being key to formulating strategies to enact social change. She recommends the use of combinations of research, practice, and activism for overcoming societies' stratified and hegemonic structures that create obstacles for marginalized groups within society. Further, she asserts multiple disciplines intersecting with art will aid in restructuring art/art history canonically.

1.2.2.1 Sites of performativity

This segment is concerned with performativity as it exists in our day-to-day lives and the performance that takes up space in the sites of activist interventions. If you trace the genealogy of the advancement of LGBTQ rights and contrast this against the performance spaces communities have consistently created, it becomes evident there has been and continues to be a dialogue between the performative aspects of identity exerted within our lived experience and the experimental theatrics performed on stage. I explore this through contemporary examples in my second chapter. I am both a queer performance artist and a patron of LGBTQ bars that host performance evenings. I have witnessed the contemporary articulations of gender-fluidity and non-binary understandings of self working in tandem with a playful shift within many activist performances and thus altering the aesthetics and resonance formally found on the stage. This, I argue, is an important interchange, one that is especially significant to racialized queer performers who have had limited options within queer spaces to represent queer expression influenced by racial and cultural understandings of self. While the stage may seem daunting, it allows for experiments in articulating expression within the confines of a community who will engage and interact with your conceptualizations. Further, the performer is able to pose a challenge to the former lenses of representation offered to them from both inside and outside the

community. In this space, I argue, we are able to see that the stage and “real life” often act as interchangeable concepts which inform and influence each other.

In his 2009 book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz offers an exploration of performance, performativity, and the stage that I find particularly useful in aiding my thinking on these topics. Making a link between parents’ wishes of their queer children’s sexuality and gender expression being “a stage” they will grow out of with stages found in queer spaces, where a “becoming” occurs, Muñoz outlines what he calls a “utopian performativity.” Here, Muñoz suggests what is transpiring upon the queer stage can be thought of along the lines of a utopia that pushes us forward, pushes us to contemplate and demand what is not here or now. The conjuring of a utopia is imbued with hopes; as Muñoz argues, “hope ... is the emotional modality that permits us to access futurity, par excellence” (2009, pp. 97-98). Further, “performance, seen as utopian performativity, is imbued with a sense of potentiality” (Muñoz, 2009, p.99). Importantly, Muñoz differentiates between potentiality and possibility by drawing from Agamben and Aristotle, in particular, how Agamben emphasizes the distinction made by Aristotle between potentiality and possibility. Muñoz explains this differentiation by writing:

Possibilities exist, or more nearly they exist within a logical real, the possible which is within the present and is linked to presence. Potentialities are different in that, although they are present, they do not exist within present things. Thus, potentialities have a temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity. (2009, p.99)

In academic spaces and external to them, I have heard a critique regarding the notion of utopia; critiques that align “utopic” with other criticisms, such as “over-romanticized” or

“idealized.” However, I argue, Muñoz offers a robust and helpful rebuke of such criticism when he looks at capitalism. Capitalism, and those who uphold it, would have us believe this is simply the natural order of things and inevitably, the only way things can progress. Instead of potential, capitalism relies on us being able to imagine only that which we deem currently possible. As Muñoz states, “The ‘should be’ of Utopia is its indeterminacy and its deployment of hope, stand against capitalism’s ever expanding and exhausting force field of how things are and will be” (Muñoz, 2009, p.99). Thus, utopia should not be thought of as a literal prescription but as a critique of the here and now, as a critique of something missing. If we can imagine a “something” that sits outside of the current power structures that dominate our lives and global affairs, we can perhaps formulate strategies to at least begin to understand how we might dismantle such structures.

Muñoz analyses the photography of Kevin McCarty who photographed the empty stages of queer, punk and other subcultural spaces in LA. The empty stage presents an anticipatory potential, a potential that makes us question what has been and what will or could be. We can also make a link here between Thomas More’s (1516) idea of utopia as a literal geographic space and the idea of utopia as a transient and metaphorical space. The empty stages, sometimes found in less than inspiring spaces, suggest the hopes, potential, and indeterminacy utopian performativity offers and can be extended to exist within the very fact that the stage exists. The stage holds audiences’ anticipations before the show and is present while they reflect and carry on performing their identity afterward. Indeed, Muñoz positions his arguments in opposition to key performance theorists of the 1990s, including Peggy Phelan, who, in part, argue that the ontology of performance is disappearance. Muñoz instead argues that a successful performance lingers and haunts the consciousness of audience members afterward, thus moving forward with

them. The weight Muñoz imparts to the stages in the art of McCarty underscores my own belief in the importance these stages hold, particularly for queer and queer racialized people. Muñoz writes:

For those of us whose relationship to popular culture is always marked by aesthetic and sexual antagonism, these stages are our actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on the self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics such as late capitalism, heteronormativity, and, in some cases, white supremacy. (2009, p.111)

Case details the performativity particularly apparent in the San Francisco lesbian scene throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Through an analysis of hippie culture's intersection with the lesbian bar scene, then so vibrant in San Francisco, Case explores the performativity that accompanied the style and digressed from classical notions of "butch." While the "classical" butches were still present, the hippie formulation of butch, "neo butch," embodied role playing and saw itself as a style playing out among women as opposed to something concerned with the masculine or in relation to men. Additionally Case details the camp element, then so visible in the San Francisco lesbian scene. While she describes not realizing at the time that her being there was a political act, Case notes retrospectively the political signification the bars assumed. Not only were they safe havens at a time when homosexuality was heavily monitored by the police, but they also allowed for playful and experimental performative shifts in identity. Case remarks upon the meeting of text and performance, mirrored in her experience of being a student involved in protests taking place on the street while learning in the classroom and attending the bars. This is useful when assessing the political significance of the sites of both activism and performativity, and additionally, of the stage, noting how they each inform other.

Returning to Muñoz, I believe it important to this thesis to note the significance he places upon hope and futurity. He asserts: “it is my belief that minoritarian subjects are cast as hopeless in a world without utopia” (Muñoz, 2009, p.97). I would extend this to suggest QPOC, in particular, are cast as subjects without a future. I am a great fan of the Afrofuturistic artworks of British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare. His works allow us to imagine Black futurity but, importantly, not as subjects without a past. For the past was another time we did not exist within and, thus, it can enable us to imagine and mobilize us to conjure futurity. Further, ideas of utopian performativity foster a different relation to the past, not one of nostalgia and of loss but of potential. On this thread, Muñoz asserts:

Utopian performativity is often fueled by the past. The past, or at least narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that is not yet here but none the less functions as a doing for futurity, conjuring of both past and future to critique presentness. (2009, p.106)

I would argue that the understanding of utopia outlined here is critical for queer people of colour. Colonial knowledge production, dominant LGBT narratives, and heteronormative culture erases us from the past and communicates that the future does not belong to us. The space that is provided to us, a space to contemplate the present, more often than not, delivers a space to contemplate barely surviving. However, in the spaces that QPOC performances manifest, and the potential such spaces elicit, we are provided an arena to conjure imaginings and move forward to claim futurity.

1.2.2.1.1 Hybridity and the performative role of the hyphen

When considering hyphenated and hybrid identities, race has been the predominating factor this consideration pertains to. However, the hyphen has been applied to readings of

performances by queer racialized artists alongside holding its own performative characteristics and for this reason I feel it is important to explore. Performance and Theatre Studies scholar Jennifer DeVere Brody's 1995 essay "Hyphen Nations" examines the trajectory the use of the hyphen to signal amalgamated identities has taken. While Brody has a specific focus on America, I find her conceptualization of the hyphen to be extensively useful. Notably, when considering the features of the hyphen, Brody asserts that all who engage in critical thought "can agree that the hyphen *performs*—it is never neutral or natural" (Case et al. 1995, p. 149). She writes:

Indeed, by performing the mid-point between often conflicting categories, hyphens occupy "impossible" positions. Hyphens may link or divide, move away from things or toward them; but they always act. Hyphens are problematic because they cannot stand alone: in fact they do not "stand" at all; rather, they mark a de-centred if central position that perpetually presents readers with a neither/nor proposition. Hyphens locate intermediate, often invisible, and always shifting spaces between supposedly oppositional binary structures. Thus, although hyphens are central, they are not individual (individual or unified) entities. (1995, p.149)

Concentrating on both the nation's problematizing of the hyphen's use and individuals' often complex relationship with identifying within the hyphen's hybrid nature, Brody expands her analysis to delve deeper into the properties that constitute the hyphen. Beginning by disseminating reductive arguments posited against hyphenated identities by theorists such as Boorstin, Brody progresses her argument to examine the positionality of the hyphen when it is not positioned to horizontally merge in the centre of a term but rather "belated hyphens that *emerge from the centre*" (Brody, 1995/2008, p. 95). Such a reading demonstrates the agency of

those who more “comfortably straddle the hyphen” (Brody, 1995/2008, p.95); about those who embody such a position, Brody argues: “hyphenates who incarnate the margin disturb binaries by throwing such straight-forward narratives into disarray” (1995, p. 153). The ability to use the hyphen to queer straightforward readings of national belonging/ostracization has been taken up by many queer racialized performance artists, an example being Chinese-Trinidadian Richard Fung. Fung’s video and installation work, spanning from 1986 to the present day, “comprises challenging videos on subjects ranging from the role of Asian male in gay pornography to colonialism, immigration, racism, homophobia AIDS, justice in Palestine and his own family history” (Richard Fung, Biography, n.d.). An example from Fung’s body of work is his 1990 video work, *My Mother’s Place*. Focusing on Fung’s mother Rita Fung, the documentary incorporates footage of interviews with Rita and four women thinkers, autobiographical narration, home movies, and documentary footage from the Caribbean. Fung’s mother is a third-generation Chinese-Trinidadian who, through oral history, tells stories that offer audiences a unique insight and education. The film poignantly explores constructions of race, class, gender, and belonging under colonialism. This feels a salient time to highlight that throughout my research, “queer racialized feminist artists,” “queer racialized arts-based activists,” “racialized queer arts-activist” and “queer racialized performers” feature as very important social and corporeal positions however linguistically are interchangeable terms that I do not feel wedded to. My flexible applications of these terms are a reflection of the fluidity such hyphenated identities engender, queering linear readings. Brody (1995/2008) articulates my thinking when she writes:

The hyphen is not a fixed point but rather a shifting positionality – a continually collapsing structure. The hyphen can be used as a *transitive* [emphasis added] verb that

suggests the term's tendency to connote *travel* [emphasis added]. It is in transit, the object of *transformation* [emphasis added], and the subject to translation. (p.85)

Muñoz identifies the shifting positionality and multi-faceted nature of the hyphen when he offers his reading of two video works by Fung. Muñoz traces the use of mimicry within the works to argue for its functioning as a form of “disidentification” which allows for the designated spaces allocated to those embodying hybridity to be both challenged and reconfigured. Borrowing from critical theorist Homi Bhabha, Muñoz cites the mirroring of the royal wave present in Fung's work as “colonial mimicry.”⁸ This, Muñoz argues, not only draws our attention to the colonized/colonizer divide but also, in its flaunting and theatrically camp manner, to a gay/straight binary, furthering our notion of hybridity to encapsulate the hybrid identity which manifests when both a queer and postcolonial subject position are embodied.

Here we are able to shift briefly back to Brody, who identifies the prevalence of hybridity as it pertains to LGBTQ identities in the scholarship of Sue Ellen-Case. Examining what is at work within the roles taken up in butch-femme dynamics, Brody asserts that “Case provides a paradigmatic example of counter hegemonic hyphenation” (Brody, 1995-2008, p. 103). Case herself asserts we should read the butch-femme couple

not [as] split subjects, suffering the torment of dominant ideology ... [but as] coupled ones that do not impale themselves on the poles of sexual difference or metaphysical values, but constantly seduce the sign system ... replacing the Lacanian slash with a lesbian bar.” (Case, 1989, as cited in Brody 1995/2008, pp. 102-103)

⁸ In postcolonial literature and criticism, mimicry describes members under colonialism imitating expressions that are intrinsic to their colonizers. This may include gestures, language, clothing, speech and phrases, politics, or attitudes. In Fung's video work *My Mothers Place*, the expectation of the young children in Trinidad to practice the perfect wave to greet the queen of England could be argued to be an example of colonial mimicry.

This, in conjunction with my exploration of performativity, provides a helpful analysis of the reliant aspect often prevalent in the *reading* of performativity. Butch and femme identities can only be read against each other; however, this does not equate to “opposites,” and I would argue that such a reading is oversimplified. Instead, they should be taken as two constitutive points that even when separated, are read against their hyphenated other.

Returning to Muñoz (1999) in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, borrowing from cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Muñoz goes on to assess what is at work within autoethnographies, asserting that when we trace our racial and cultural pasts, a subject is not locating their “essential history” but rather “just one more identity bit that constitutes the matrix that is hybridity” (Muñoz, 1999, p.83). When analyzing the locations of hybridity, Muñoz finds it useful to draw from the definition of contact zones outlined by language and literatures scholar Mary Louise Pratt.⁹ It is within this definition that we can see the coinhabited aspect of hybrid spaces, noting the necessary interaction, dialogue, and interlocking movements between those that pivot asymmetrical relations of power as opposed to an understanding of separation experienced within such locations.

While Brody continues in her essay to interview subjects who portray the respect for difference the space created by the hyphen offers, Brody concludes with questions that pose a challenge to her thinking and to the other theorists I have explored. She asks, “how are we to evaluate the eruption of ever-emergent hyphenated identities? Is this shifting space actually liberatory? Can it function as a site of resistance as many claim?” (Brody, 1995/2008, p.107). Brody perhaps hints to a paradox when she asserts that, “the difficulty with determining the

⁹ For further reading, consult Pratt (1991) *Arts of the Contact Zone*.

efficiency of the suspended hyphen lies largely with the subject who reads. Although the hyphen attempts to mark more accurately the discontinuity of specific subjects, it too is highly reductive” (Brody, 1995/2008 p. 107). This assertion, I feel, reminds us of the pitfalls that have plagued political movements, alliances, and spaces that are strictly predicated on identity. However much one may try to communicate fluidity within identities, the very naming of a term sets out often very clear boundaries of what does and doesn’t constitute that identity, thus identities perhaps always possess a reductive potential.

1.2.2.1.2 Standpoint theory as a framework for analyzing queer performance

Throughout the main body of my thesis, I draw from my own “standpoint.” When appraising the situated and relational aspects of performance, I find standpoint theory, a feminist theoretical perspective that advocates for the importance of situated knowledge, to be a helpful framework to aid the process. American feminist scholar Nancy Hartsock published her influential book *Money, Sex and Power* in 1983, adapting Marxist concepts to claim, “that it is women's unique standpoint in society that provides the justification for the truth claims of feminism while also providing it with a method with which to analyze reality” (Hekman, 1997, p. 341). Throughout the development of the theory, two key themes remained integral to feminist understanding: “that knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced” (Hekman, 1997, p. 342). Both the former and latter produced barriers, for feminists had the challenge of theorizing how knowledge that is situated can be thought of as “true” and how it is differences among women may be acknowledged. As “a politics of difference” was established alongside the understanding that women are heterogenous, thus requiring a feminist framework breaking from notions of universality, standpoint theory was able to provide a premise for such discussions via the notion

of situated knowledge. Indeed, as Hartsock asserted, "Feminism as a mode of analysis leads us to respect experience and differences, to respect people enough to believe that they are in the best possible position to make their own revolution" (Hartsock, 1998, p. 40). Feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins developed her own thesis, advocating and accounting for the unique standpoint of Black women. Collins respected the politics of difference, and asserted as her objective to account for the standpoint of Black women while not obviating the differences in existence among the women, and thus not falling prey to homogeneity. Collins argues that "the ideas that are validated by different standpoints ... produce "the most objective truths" (Collins, 1989, p. 773). Where Collins and Hartsock differ is in their understanding of absolute truth: Hartsock claims that the views of the oppressed represent absolute truth, while Collins rejects this notion to advocate for partial truth. However, it should be noted that Collins, too, rejects relativism, a claim that all perspectives are equal in weight. While there have been many developments, rejections and rearticulations of standpoint theory, all are grounded in a politics of understandings of unique experiences, only able to be provided and truly given by minoritized groups that will differ based on social standing and positionality. As Hekman states, "Feminist standpoint theory defines knowledge as particular rather than universal; it jettisons the neutral observer of modernist epistemology; it defines subjects as constructed by relational forces rather than as transcendent" (1997, p. 356).

I find this framework to be particularly useful to my research for a multitude of reasons. It accounts for the experience of an audience member in relation to a performance they are privy to, and, I argue, their reading will be mediated by their own subjectivities. Further, a queer and or racialized performer's experience of their community, their relationship to the site of performance, and, in turn, their relation to the audience will be grounded in their own unique

standpoint. I found this to be prevalent in my reading of queer art historian Mathias Danbolt's 2016 essay "Striking reverberations: beating back the unfinished history of the colonial aesthetic with Jeannette Ehlers' *Whip it Good*." Examining the live performance and correlating film work *Whip it Good* (2013/2014) by Danish-Caribbean artist Jeannette Ehlers, Danbolt seeks to reconcile discourses of decoloniality with queer feminisms and more specifically, queer feminist art history. Recognizing that artists' traditional route of reproducing canonical examples of European art works throughout history entrenches romanticized notions of a "post"-racial society, Danbolt identifies the challenges Ehlers's work poses to this, notably through situated performance and audience relationality. Drawing from standpoint theory, Danbolt asserts that the artist's choice of the omission of "the pedagogical" from the installation, for which she received criticism, dictates that one's understanding of the work will highlight their social position. He argues:

By refraining from taking on the task of teaching the uninformed majority about its implications in histories of oppression, Ehlers's hard-hitting enactment leaves it up to us to reflect upon our own position in the entangled histories of art and colonialism. (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 279).

Further, when considering what is at stake in the audience participatory piece, Danbolt writes:

But this invitation complicates the sense and sensation of the act, as it puts pressure on questions of entitlement and embodiment pertaining to the act of whipping. The flogging of the white canvas conjures different effects and affects depending on the body swinging the whip, the composition of the audience and the place where it unfolds. The significance of the gesture cannot but change when being performed in a gallery by, for

instance, a white man like me rather than a black woman like Ehlers, as both the gesture of whipping and the figure of the white canvas are so heavily charged by their historical connotations and their link to aestheticized, sexualized, gendered, and racialized scenes of subjection. (Jones & Silver, 2016, pp. 278-279)

Danbolt points to the vital linkages to the past, present, and future that are inherent in Ehlers's work. Danbolt suggests these linkages, running parallel to the multitude of positionalities held by viewers and participants, offer the potential for new and unknowable formulations of knowledge production and ultimately counter governmental attempts at "wiping the slate clean," suggesting a complete disconnect from a colonial past.

If you are a Caribbean member of Danish society, you will know of and understand Ehlers's complex references to slavery. Further, the interactive installation alters and shifts in significance depending on the demographic of the whip hand and as such, viewers' relation and reading of the work will shift. Linking to Collins's theorization of partial truth embodied by oppressed peoples, Danbolt, without attempting to equalize the weight of his perspective against those of marginalized groups, argues that his own standpoint as a member of a majority is informed by his situated knowledge that can be read against Ehlers's. He writes:

If my embodied specificity is less obviously on the line when whipping the page with words rather than a canvas in public, this does not mean that questions of embodiment are irrelevant to my encounter with the project. Not only has the act of watching the video performance its own embodied effects, but my written response to *Whip it Good* is also informed by my situated knowledge as a Danish-based, gay, white art historian...one originally schooled in the whitewashed tradition of Eurocentric art history that I read *Whip it Good* against. (Jones & Silver, 2016, p.279).

I read this as an attempt to call attention to the responsibilities of majorities to question their own positionality and harbour an inner self-reflexivity when considering the routes of their knowledge and the potential disqualifications of other standpoints at the hands of their own. Further, Danbolt's comment regarding watching draws our attention to the weighted position of the spectator, which I will explore in my next segment on racialized representation.

1.3 The role of representation as it pertains to racialized bodies

“Representation” is a complex and convoluted concept and its merits and limits often continue to form part of the dialogue when queer racialized feminists seek to counter erasure through the use of arts-based activism. On the one hand, minorities are heterogenous and can arguably not be represented by one person's lived reality; on the other, lack of visibility leads to erasure and within visibility, positive representation is arguably important for it mitigates dominant depictions of potentially reductive and damaging portrayals of communities. Indeed, as has been the preoccupation of scholars and theorists across a range of disciplines, speaking for others (Alcoff 1991), which includes the deployment of representational images and concepts, is an act of silencing and I contend, an impossibility. When addressing Black female representation, Black feminist scholar Michelle Wallace reminds us that it is

impossible for anybody to speak in anybody else's voice, [and] such a project tends to further consolidate the lethal global presupposition (which is unconscious) in the dominant discourse that women of color are incapable of describing, much less analyzing, reality, themselves, or their place within the world. (Wallace, 1993, p. 129)

Representation further holds the potential to use the “scope of representation” as a terrain to reject and counter the confining lenses of representation which I will elaborate on when I come to look at the contributions of José Esteban Muñoz.

A major contributor to my coming to believe that this research project is so vital was my finding that key scholarship covering queer performance in Britain had seemingly failed to position race as a critical point of analysis, thus rendering queer racialized performance in Britain invisible. I find this problematic, as we are being excluded from “the now” but further, excluded from the archive that is being created from the history of this moment. When art historian Jennifer Gonzalez asked art theorist and performance artist Tina Takemoto whether she felt the discipline of art history is equipped to assess the contributions of queer feminist of colour artists, Takemoto responded by stating:

It’s compelling that you phrase this question in terms of competency rather than inclusion. After all, if we consider how many queer feminists of colour artists are represented and discussed in recent feminist and queer art historical textbooks, anthologies and exhibition catalogues, the numbers remain dismally low. (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 294)

Interestingly, Takemoto goes on to outline her interest in what would be at work for art history “as a discipline to be ‘equipped’ to assess artistic production by queer feminists of colour” (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 294). I read this to suggest the platforms that play host to the artistic outputs of queer feminists of colour perhaps require a specialist knowledge and/or understanding in order to be able to provide successful assessments and representations of the works. Gonzalez informs my reading when she asserts that she

found the discipline of art history in the 1990s to lack both the competence and vocabulary to account accurately for the nuances of cultural difference operative in the work. White art historians and critics were rarely willing to do the research to read it effectively. (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 295)

I write about this in more depth in chapter three where I address the art world's reception to racialized female performance artists working throughout the 1970s to the 1990s. As critics and other artists applied a highly reductive lens when addressing the works of these women, essentially displacing the work itself in favour of analyzing the racial and gendered identity of the artists, few were willing to actually research and educate themselves on the culture of these women. What ensued was a reading of these women against the critic's own identity position, thus casting the artists to the position of other and never producing an inciteful, effective, or appropriate reading of the work itself. Prominent performance artist Adrian Piper, who was active through the 1970s to the 1990s (and continues to exhibit in the present day), confesses her skepticism when art critics seemed to take up a newfound interest in analyzing these women's works. When explaining her skepticism, Piper wrote, "It coincides too neatly with an interest in difference and otherness in other fields such as comparative literature, history, and anthropology" (1990, p. 241). I read this to suggest perhaps these other fields possessed a genuineness which was not paralleled in the discourse of art history nor the art world. Here I can offer the potential of disciplines looking outside of themselves which this thesis aims to do. The combination of feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, activism, performance studies, art history, and social history allows for the hyphenated nature of the works ensuing from these disciplines to be effectively read without the limitations that inevitably ensue from sticking to one discipline.

My focus on performance as a medium for arts-based activism is deliberate and stems from my recognition that it is frequently chosen as a medium by queer racialized feminists and from my personal realization that there are instances where the only way to talk about the body is through the body. Takemoto summarizes this by offering that "Performance and installation art

seem to be productive spaces to work through such questions as erasure and invisibility precisely because it foregrounds presence and even confrontation” (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 301). To this she adds, “I think that for many queer feminists and artists of colour, performance art offers a powerful means of complicating notions of self-presence and visibility in front of a live audience or for a camera” (Jones & Silver, 2016, p. 301).

I find it helpful to review the works of Black cultural theorists such as David Marriot who have written extensively on Black photography and cinema with a focus on race and representation. Black people globally have had to contend with historically brutal and contemporarily derogative images to represent their bodies and “realities,” most often than not represented by those other than “us.” The photographic evidence that exists of lynched Black bodies forms “horrific documentary resources that tell as much about the spectators as they tell about those who have been brutally victimized” (Marriott, 2000, p. 151). When appraising the position of the white male spectator, Marriot questions what taking the picture can do and reveal about the self and asserts the act is:

a means to fashion the self through the image of a dead Black man and the identification with which whites will follow. At the same time it’s as if he wants to make an archive out of what he sees, to preserve an event for the benefit of those who could not be there.

(Marriott, 2000, pp. 151-152)

Responding to this, Black queer theorist Rinaldo Walcott argues:

Black people, and particularly Black queer people have worked with these desiring lenses to recapture and reframe the photograph as a practice of the poetics of relations, a homopoetics of relations in gay hands, and an ethics of living life. These practices move beyond witnessing, these practices are constitutive, as I would suggest about the

photographer's film-makers and other artists I mention above of Black death and life.

(2013, p. 152)

I would extend this analysis to incorporate performances by queer Black arts-activists. As we continue to have our experiences sold to us through the statistics of murdered Black transwomen and of homophobic and transphobic violent attacks, it is my contention that Black queer performance artists are reconfiguring these narratives of death. Instead, they are representing the agency of the queer Black body in life, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of being our own curators of the images that will form the archive yet to be built from this moment in history while offering a queer Black imaginary full of possibility for audiences today. Further, I find that Walcott's assertion speaks to Danbolt's reflection that a "moving beyond witnessing" is something, I argue, performance is able to activate by transforming audiences from spectators into active participants. Further, I argue that the representational aspect of performance provides a stage to play with and alter the parameters for reading the body and the inscriptions cast upon it.

Muñoz, who is most famously known for his work concerning "disidentification" (a term to describe the strategy of recycling dominant images and structures to form a politics of resistance from within the mainstream), uses the works of queer racialized performance artists such as Vaginal Davis, Richard Fung, Carmelita Tropicana and Marga Gomez to identify the ways in which they use the confines of representation existing in the minds of "the mainstream" to tear down the structures that allow such imaginings to persist. However, highlighting the ways that access to modes of representation can mitigate a subject's ability to disidentify, Muñoz identifies the classist access to modes of representation to be a key feature pertaining to whether disidentifying is a viable option for subjects wishing to do so. The life and works of gay Latinx

artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres act as a contrast to the Latinx transwomen featured in the 1990 documentary *Salt Mines* directed by Susana Aikin, produced the same year as the seminal documentary *Paris is Burning*, to construct this argument. Whereas Gonzalez-Torres was able to successfully utilize his platform to disidentify with the racialized parameters ordinarily offered to Latinx's in the artworld, such systems of representation were not readily available to the homeless women featured in *Salt Mines*. Further, while investigating representation, Muñoz cites Michelle Wallace to argue about the futility of deliberating on negativity or positivity within representational fields. This is an important analysis that I read to interpolate us to, as Muñoz asserts, focus on the transfiguration that is possible within chosen modes of representation as opposed to getting caught up with subjective notions of *what* could be considered positive as opposed to negative forms of representations.

The concepts explored in this review are useful in appraising the mechanisms and apparatus utilized by queer racialized arts-based activists—what is at stake for queer racialized artists, understanding why art forms continue to be employed by those wishing to enact change, and identifying the interaction between sites of performative protest and lived experience.

1.3.1 Chapter outline

In my first chapter proceeding this literature review, I explore geographies of sexuality. Starting with a brief delineation of historic homosexual relations to space, I progress to analyze how queers of colour are using arts-based activism in the present day to claim space in Britain and fight varied forms of oppression. I find that the historic erasure of racialized bodies from LGBT spaces continues to manifest in the present via the exclusion of QPOC from gay villages in inner cities, and I take the city of Manchester as a case study here. Using my own standpoint to critique the mapping of insider and outsider from QPOC space, I explore the arts-activist

collective Rainbow Noir who I believe are successfully mitigating these pitfalls. Further, I argue they are ensuring the place of QPOC both spatially and figuratively. The following chapter focuses on the use of performance as a form of arts-activism crucial to queers of colour. Looking at the London-based platform the Cocoa Butter Club, for both POC and QPOC, I suggest that although dominant groups have appropriated and attempted to universalize our histories and expression, agency rests within the use of the body. I observe how it is my case studies are making critical interventions in such attempts and are refusing such universalism. The stage acts as a platform to empower both audience member and performer while providing a safe space for queer and cultural expression to meet, a meeting which mainstream platforms continue to attempt to keep separate. In the final chapter, preceding my conclusion, I acquaint my reader with the London-based collectives *sorryyoufeeluncomfortable* and BBZ. I focus on their collaborative project which aimed to provide a space for women and non-binary British recently-graduated artists of African descent to engage in an alternative graduation. This chapter explores the relationship between scholarship and art/artists and QPOC's relationship to the academy. Within my findings, collectivity, mentorship and communal engagement are vital components underpinning both organizers' and participants' wishes to collaboratively utilize arts-activism as a tool to radically alter dominant narratives that seek to erase us from the archive of history and from ideas of futurity.

Chapter 2: Queer of Colour Formations, Space and Place

Within the discipline of sociology, practitioners have long mapped and documented where sexuality is inscribed into urban landscapes and how it comes to inform our relation to our surroundings. The foundational book *Mapping Desires: Geographies of Sexualities* (1995), edited by David Bell and Gill Valentine, sought to sediment sexuality as a credible topic within the field of geography. Contributors to the volume sought to deepen and further the field's prior practice of literally mapping where "gay neighbourhoods" were present to instead consider the intersection of queer theory, feminism and geographies of homosexuality, bisexuality and trans identities.¹⁰ Such consideration surely is important when meditating on the multitude of geographies QPOC inhabit both literally and psychically. The variety of relationships QPOC hold in relation to space, be they cultural, sexual and/or gendered, is apt to produce multiple relational dialogues and paradoxical dichotomies that are each subject to being in relation to hegemonic, heterosexual ways of navigating space.

In order to think about contemporary QPOC geographies, it is helpful to briefly look at the historical trajectory of LGBTQ relation to space. Gay villages have early roots dating back to the 1920s, however, the decades after the Second World War, specifically the 1960s through to the 1980s, are the time periods often written about when referencing village histories, largely on account of the political strategizing and activism that came out of the LGBT districts throughout these eras. In their 2015 article, geography scholars Catherine Jean Nash and Andrew Gorman-Murray write, "Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, gay villages increasingly engaged in local

¹⁰ As scholars such as Tim Davis have delineated, mapping where gay and lesbian presence is concentrated essentializes sexuality and suggests that we are a demographically distinct group. Davis (1995) argues that in fact these maps only expose portions of people who engage with the gay/lesbian scene.

politics, consolidating their presence and creating community through economic development, the provisions of services, and political action around rights protections” (2015, p.87). After the war, the combination of oppressive legislature and societal attitudes resulted in members of the LGBT community settling and working in specific locations; these locations became known as villages. Many of those who settled in the villages were former soldiers who had been dismissed from the military on account of being homosexual. The villages initially enabled safety and protection, however, they became a means for LGBT communities to have collective representation in politics and engage in grass-roots activism. The 1980s witnessed the villages take on a new level of significance as the LGBT community faced the HIV and AIDS crisis. During this time, the villages “provided core services including hospice care, outreach, health education, and counselling services” (Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2015, p.87).

Gay neighbourhoods and villages, as they’re commonly known, have provided safe spaces for gay people to come together and politically strategize. Lesbianism even saw women moving into communes to communally cohabitate, removing them from exposure to both homophobia and the violence of patriarchy while offering an alternative way to consider capital.¹¹ Villages have also enabled notable subcultures within the LGBT scene, such as BDSM, to thrive. Importantly, these places have fostered the creation of performance stages within village bars, stages that provide a space for the queer expression of identity, at times, the visual subversion of representative identity signifiers offered by mainstream society. Reflecting on identity, it’s important to note that gay neighbourhoods were seen as spaces for the creation of

¹¹ Coming to prominence in the 1970’s, the USA witnessed particularly notable numbers of lesbians strategically living in separatist environments. For further reading see Sandilands, (2002).

distinct gay identity (D'Emilio, 1981). This is notable when considering the relationship between performativity inherent to gay identities and the performances exhibited within gay venues, both informing and informed by their relationship to their geographic location.

While I have briefly delineated positive offerings villages historically provided, social geographer Tim Davis offers an important and healthy critique of gay territories and the discourse concerned with mapping them. In his 1995 essay, “The Diversity of Queer Politics and the Redefinition of Sexual Identity and Community in Urban Spaces,” Davis outlines the move away from territories functioning as safe havens to becoming a reality of isolation and oppression. While concentrating on America, the analysis put forth is helpful to consult, for it speaks to the political shift LGBT communities were seeing across the Global North. Writing in the mid-1990s, reflecting on the previous decade, Davis notes that, “the power to create social and political change is no longer concentrated in government and a group of identifiable institutions” (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 259). Not entirely dismissing policy, he elaborates that, “legislation is still needed to improve the position of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in society, but legislative victories are increasingly symbolic, when real acceptance can only be created in the cultural sphere” (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 259). I read this to hint at the often contrived and deceptive results legislature and policy enact without altering societal attitudes, thus, the impact of an enclosed community making electoral change may have done little to affect the mindset of folk outside of gay villages.

Important to this thesis, Davis identifies the internal shift within gay and lesbian communities as they began to take a more thorough analytical approach to the “internal differences and the impact of strategies and identity constructions upon various segments of the gay/lesbian/ bisexual population” (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 259). Certainly, to make cogent

this point, Davis writes that, “gays and lesbians have found a small niche in the local political structure, and the small measure of electoral and institutional power garnered through neighbourhood control has largely benefited middle-class, gay white men” (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 259).

Indeed, while QPOC have failed to have their social or political interests upheld by gay villages, they additionally are affected by societal beliefs and media constructions of POC “bringing down” spatial areas and making them undesirable. Bacchetta et al. saliently sums this belief up when they write:

Early scripts of vulnerable yet enterprising gays and lesbians who settle inner city areas that have been run down by people of colour, whose degenerative failure to cultivate their surroundings contrasts with the creative proclivities of white gay cis-men in particular, prefigure neoliberal and securitizing frameworks of hate crime and queer gentrification and naturalize a colonial-capitalist logic of territory. (2015, p. 771)

These scripted narratives further act to position QPOC as absent from LGBT history within the archive as one is led to imagine them as elsewhere, thus detaching them from any claim to queer space. Through agency and activism, QPOC have created their own places, transforming previous narratives that erase their presence from space. In their 2015 article, “Queer of colour formations and translocal spaces in Europe,” Bacchetta et.al describe placemaking as referencing the

concrete strategies of resistance and disturbance that disrupt, however momentarily, the exclusionary coherence of spaces assumed to be white and/or straight. By placemaking we mean the actual reconceptualization and materialized production of space as QPoC place by QPoC subjects. (2015, p.775)

These acts, I argue, are extremely important in heightening the visibility of QPOC in space but also in aiding them to communally create worlds “beyond the murderous logics of securitization, privatization and territorialization that characterize our current context of racial and colonial capitalism” (Bacchetta et.al, 2015, p. 776). I agree with Davis, who contends:

gay territories have played a profound role in increasing the power and visibility of gay and lesbian politics, and it is likely that the movement to a new form of ‘Queer’ politics could not have happened without the groundwork laid by the builders of these gay territories. (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 260)

However, as QPOC are inscribing *their* agency and presence into cities across the globe, I believe it to be of importance to document the apparatus they are utilizing and exactly how this is manifesting. While I could not explore the history of queer space nor the agency of QPOC placemaking in its entirety here, I have hopefully given a concise introduction to these significant concepts. I will now move on to offer a critical look at the potential pitfalls of space and place predicated on identity before moving on to examine Rainbow Noir, a QTIBPOC arts-activist collective inscribing their presence into the city of Manchester and, I argue, the UK more broadly.

2.1 Space and place: Who is cast as an insider and who is outcast?

“Queer” and “POC” are both favoured and highly contested terms that for some liberate and provide possibilities that sit outside of dominant LGBT narratives (homonationalism (Puar, 2007), gay imperialism (Haritaworn et al., 2008), homotransnationalism (Bacchetta and Haritaworn, 2011) but for others re-inscribe US-centric ideas while erasing differences and keeping Europe white and America hegemonic (Bacchetta, P., El-Tayeb, F., & Haritaworn, J.

2015).¹² However, while neither experience should be held as right or wrong, I advocate for the importance of term “QPOC’s” mobilization as a means “to describe the radical interventions of QPOC into a European landscape from which they remain violently excluded” (Bacchetta et. al., 2015, p. 769). The spaces I begin to explore through this chapter, as well as the ones proceeding, explicate the interventions my case studies are making via the creation of spaces that sit outside of dominant art and LGBT platforms in the UK. This said, maintaining a level of criticality while assessing what underpins the creation of such spaces and acknowledging the pitfalls of spaces predicated on identity is of course important as to not produce overromanticized readings. Thus, I will share an example drawn from my own standpoint which highlights the problematic exclusions such spaces can produce. Hopefully in highlighting this, it will become clear what measures are needed to minimize and counter the possibility of such issues arising.

In 2016, London held Queer Picnic, an alternative to the official London Pride which many for a long time have found to be less a march of protest and more a commercial “pink washed” event. Furthermore, a large proportion of the queer community do not support the presence of police at pride (they are present at London Pride). The year 2016 marked the event’s third year. Queer Picnic’s official statement on their Facebook event page read:

¹² Homonationalism refers to homosexuality being included in national rhetoric. It took particular signification in America’s “war on terror” in which “Muslim” was cast as a polar opposite of homosexuality thus insinuating a white homosexuality able to unite with heterosexuals in national belonging and Islamophobia. Gay Imperialism, which resonates with many of us in Britain who are queer and racialized, similarly speaks to a notion encouraged by predominantly white privileged gay males such as Peter Tatchell the British “LGBT human rights campaigner” codifying Muslims and those from Global South as homophobic. Here a codification of white as “gay” and “racialized” as heterosexual is made. Further, the world has witnessed the far-right collaborating with white gay, lesbian, and queer individuals under this project. Homotransnationalism speaks to coalitional, transnational feminist projects and is difficult to summarize in short but is important to mention here. For further reading, consult Bacchetta, P., & Haritaworn, J. (2011).

Are you tired of the unbearable whiteness of being queer, the stress of navigating London as a queer person of colour or even as a queer white person? Do you love being with other queers but feel that pride is just a bit too cooperate/assimilationist/white/expensive/policed or triggering?

Would you like to express your queer identity without paying for a float? Chill out while collaborating and sharing thoughts with other queers in a peaceful environment with the option to dance to music you actually enjoy?

Some of us are in dire need of an alternative pride to the one that exists. Join us for a day of healing, skill sharing and good vibes in the form of an ALTERNATIVE PRIDE PICNIC.

ALL WELCOME (except bigots) Family Friendly and Wheelchair accessible

Very much keen for this event grow many legs and arms and evolve into something monstrously beautiful. Please suggests things that would make the day perfect and lets work together to make them real. (Queer Picnic, 2016)

The picnic was held at Burgess Park in Camberwell, an area in South London which although not able to boast queer notoriety comparable to SOHO or Vauxhall, is familiar to many as it plays host to the Flying Dutchman, a pub which regularly hosts queer kink and BDSM nights among other queer events. The picnic was well attended and had a very communal feel which was fostered by the sharing of food and banners celebrating trans and POC folk: two sections of the community who have historically been known to feel excluded from London Pride. The day was arguably a success, as reflected by the diverse range of people in attendance and many positive comments being posted in the event's Facebook forum post-picnic.

For the 2017 picnic, the Facebook event was created by new organizers. The official statement had been altered to include such wording as:

NO BIGOTS

*Unbearable whiteness:

This is a QTIPOC lead and centred event. We are concerned at the idea of groups of white people turning up as if this is organised with them in mind.

Please don't come if you aren't coming with a QTIPOC, or contributing to the organisation.

White Allies: if you see a white person taking up too much space or culturally appropriating we hope you will ask them to leave to take off the labour off of our shoulders. (Queer Picnic 2k17, 2017)

I was contacted by a queer couple I had planned to meet at the picnic informing me that although they were immigrants, one of whom has been subject to xenophobia in Britain—it should be taken into account that the Brexit proceedings were well under way in 2017—they felt they would be taking up space and perhaps this was not an event for them. As the picnic had not previously stated it was an exclusively POC event, nor had I interpreted the event as such, I was confused by the overt stance now being conveyed. After leaving a message of enquiry in the discussion forum which received eleven likes, 61 comments were generated. This included a message from a former organizer who responded:

As one of the organisers for the last two years I agree that we should stand together and hope your friends reconsider coming. This picnic was created to provide a space for Queer people of colour and their friends/comrades and it was not intended to divide or police. The thing in the event description about "please don't come if your [*sic*] a white

person unless you were invited by a person of colour" has been added this year and im [sic] not sure why. I personally disagree and wish I had been asked about this because it's alienating and weird gatekeeping of what is essentially a public event in a park. Will try to talk with all previous and present organisers about this today and respond with a proper post. (Queer Picnic 2k17, 2017)

This received nine likes but also disgruntled messages from a current organizer. My original message was also met with contempt from a current organizer who ended their comment: "I cant [sic] believe I even have to explain this tbh..." (Queer Picnic 2k17, 2017).

The 61 comments included a range of varying opinions, some completely disagreeing with my enquiry into the new language, some thanking me for "speaking out." This included one queer Black female who expressed the alienation for interracial relationships the picnic's message had failed to recognize:

Please remember that both jade [sic] and I are speaking as QPOC. Our views deserve to be listened to. I agree that we do need our own space and I'm thankful for all the Q picnic organisers have endeavoured to do. But please respect that you do not speak for every QPOC. Also it is not only QPOC who are excluded from mainstream pride events. Trans and non binary folk black or white are massively excluded. Women are excluded, families are excluded as are people with disabilities. More than anything there is a need for unity. Currently a lot of QPOC are feeling really excluded from this event basically because they don't only have relationships with other QPOC. Thank you Jade Pollard-Crowe for having the bravery to make this point. It's something I've wanted to post here for a few years. Never had the courage as I felt I would only be met with hostility. But as you spoke up thought I would catch your back. Xxx (Queer Picnic 2k17, 2017)

Here, we are also being drawn to the silencing which is often performed in identity-led spaces. While some people have their voice affirmed, others are censored, leading everyone who observes to have to choose a side. This creates an ultimately divisive environment and leaves unanswered the question: “how are these maps of in-sider/outsider employed, negotiated, or contested?” (Rodríguez, 2003, p. 40) Ethnic and Performance Studies scholar Juana María Rodríguez summarizes this issue when she writes:

‘Identity politics’ seeming desire to cling to explicative postures, unified subjecthood, or facile social identifications has often resulted in repression, self-censorship, and exclusionary practices that continue to trouble organizing efforts and work against the interests of full human rights, creative individual expression, and meaningful social transformation. (2003, p. 41)

Rodríguez is responding to an argument put forth by queer and feminist studies scholar Emma Pérez, who defends “strategic essentialism” in order to practice “resistance against dominant ideologies that silence and/or model marginalized groups” (Pérez as cited in Rodríguez, 2003).¹³ I certainly do not disagree with this, and my reading of Rodríguez leads me to believe she also doesn’t in principal; it is more a case of needing to give consideration to the questions that emerge at the point of essentialism’s employment. In keeping with this thinking, Rodríguez draws from Butler, who suggests what is required is “a double movement: the insistence on identity and the subjection of identity-terms to a contestation in which the exclusionary procedures by which those identity-terms are produced are called into question”

¹³ The term “strategic essentialism” was first coined by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak. It describes the political tactic of minoritized groups collectively representing themselves in pursuit of a common goal. According to Spivak, while differences inevitably exist among such groups, this temporary essentialization may be strongly advantageous. See, Spivak (1995) *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*.

(Butler, 1995, p. 129). I recount the 2017 experience to call attention to the negotiations one has to undertake both individually and communally in identity led spaces, negotiations which are brought to the forefront when collectivizing for activist agendas. While there may not be a definitive answer to the questions raised, perhaps there is maneuverability within the very asking of the questions that open up spaces for new insights on alleviating exclusionary practices; perhaps “it is the question rather than the answer that produces the moment of critical intervention” (Rodríguez, 2003, p. 71).

In this next section, I introduce Rainbow Noir, a QPOC activist group, formed in 2013, who, to my mind, avoid taking up the position of furthering the types of exclusions previously explored. In order to do this, I will outline the importance of the space they occupy by looking at the recorded history of sexuality within the city they occupy before analyzing the collective’s specific projects.

2.1.1 Rainbow Noir: A critical intervention in the city of Manchester

My research is concerned with arts-based activism currently being employed by queer racialized feminists in Britain. This chapter will begin to examine the work currently being done by introducing an analysis of the Manchester-based organization Rainbow Noir. However, understanding the importance of space and place illuminates why such groups are required and highlights the nuances of the interruptions they make into hegemonic geographies. In order to demonstrate how I am using the terms “space” and “place,” I first outline the history of the city of Manchester’s gay quarter before moving on to highlight the new types of radical spaces being created.

Rainbow Noir, I argue, successfully mitigate many of the identity-based exclusions previously discussed. One way they do this, which I will return to elaborate on later in the

chapter, is by employing an understanding of QPOC that is reflective of the shifting, unfixed point that constitutes the diaspora. Rainbow Noir describe themselves as “a social and peer support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) people of colour (POC) in Manchester.” When elucidating on how they operate, they state that, “the group have a physical space, an online group space and also advocate for LGBTQI POC in and around Manchester” (LGBT Foundation, n.d.). They explain their motivations by stating:

The group came about from a frustration at the lack of representation of LGBTQI POC within LGBT communities and communities of colour. Many people felt invisible within communities they were a part of and wanted people to acknowledge that LGBTQI POC exist too. Lots of LGBTQI POC feel marginalised within LGBT communities and so it was important to create have a space of our own to meet others and to have a space where we mattered. (LGBT Foundation, Spotlight, Rainbow Noir, n.d.)

Contextualizing this sentiment, the site of their formation, Manchester, is internationally known for Canal Street, Manchester’s gay village. The village shares a history with many gay villages globally. It began its days as a site of secret meetings and hidden encounters and even after the legalization of homosexuality in 1967, homosexuals visiting the area continued to be subjugated by the authorities.¹⁴ In the 1980s, Britain played host to then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s overt homophobia and promotion of traditional family values, and during this period the village witnessed routine police raids with patrons often being arrested and held in police cells. As it stands today, the village is comprised of bars, hotels, cafés, LGBT charities, and

¹⁴ For a detailed exploration of Canal Street prior to and proceeding the legalization of homosexuality in the UK, you might visit their website, canal-st.co.uk.

shops that cater to LGBT interest. Canal Street has faced the pressures of gentrification and has witnessed the closure of many household establishments. A Guardian article published in 2018 details the new developments that have been built and are scheduled to happen around the village. 2018 would be the last year the main stage for Manchester Pride, formally located in a car park in the village, would be present, as the plot was sold off to hotel developers. The article further delves into the concerns of bar owners who feared “untenable conflict of interest between future residents and longstanding LGBT establishments. Noise complaints are inevitable, they fear, particularly in summer when queues can be 50-deep in the early hours” (Pidd & O’Connell, 2018).

I am drawing from the official Canal Street website as a means of representing the village via its most accessible online source. When reading the extensive history provided on this site, the narrative is exclusive, referring only to cis-gay males; it mentions a gay and lesbian historical walking tour but does not detail any lesbian historical facts on the site, which is starkly contrasted by the extensive historical accounts of the lives of gay men. Further, it becomes clear that although the site states the village caters to lesbian, gay and trans folk, the values the narrative promotes do not reflect those held by many queer communities. When describing the progress the village has experienced since the 1980s, content contributor Jon Atkin writes: “these days, things have changed enormously, with a Police Liaison Officer for the gay community and the local police being cheered as they proudly march in the Pride parade through the city streets every year” (Manchester Gay Village, a History, n.d.). It is important to ask: whom have things changed for? As I briefly alluded to earlier in this chapter, people of colour notoriously do not support police marching in Pride, and so it must be surmised that the author’s narrative speaks to

white “cheer”; similarly, trans communities have tended to feel unprotected by police. When considering the diversifying of LGBT communities, the site states:

There is a tension about the acceptability (or otherwise) of sexual expression in this newly metrosexual village. There are tensions between the many lifestyle choices which go to make up a Queer community. There are tensions about gender and the differing needs or wants of men and women. Like everywhere in society, there are tensions about race and religion. It is good to see groups setting up to support queers from minority ethnic groups. (Manchester Gay Village, A History, n.d.)

While change and new realizations can produce difficult and challenging conversations, I read this statement as a transferal of responsibility. The responsibility by spaces predicated on binary understandings of homosexuality to work at incorporation has been pushed onto communities of colour, trans, and non-binary folk and women to create their own spaces and networks of support. While throughout this thesis I argue for the necessity of creating alternative spaces to both strategize and formulate new and radical communal ways of being and understanding, the expression of “tension” to describe “exclusion” voids responsibility of dominant groups to examine their behaviours and privileges. Furthermore, while alternative social and support groups are often required by QPOC, this does not account for exclusion from social spaces such as the clubs and events which largely make up the gay village. Preceding the historical account on the website is a shortened version of an article, written in 2010, by a longstanding patron of the village, detailing the new venues appearing along Canal Street. He states:

The last 6 months has seen a fast gathering tide of new, smaller independent bars that are properly queer. Eagle and its Black brother now attract the type of crowd that once drank

and cruised in The Rem. The testosterone is interrupted only by an occasional blast of poppers and it is a great place to drink real ale and have a real conversation. (Manchester Gay Village, A History, n.d.)

He later goes on to detail a men's only bar that recently opened. The use of the term "properly queer" was in fact utilized to describe cis-male interests which, when considered in the context of gentrification, leads to the question of whether these new venues are fighting gentrification faced by the LGBT community, or adding to it? When analyzing this very issue, Bacchetta et.al draw from urban studies theorist Richard Florida, who argues that these contradictions have found expression in the creative city model, where queers with race and class privileges are hailed as "pioneers" who break into areas hitherto considered ungentrifiable (Florida, 2002). The narratives detailed on Canal Street's site provide an understanding of Rainbow Noir's need to collectivize, ultimately disrupting this narrative.

While Rainbow Noir have key organizers such as their Strategic Lead Chloe Cousins, they are in no way a one face movement, and thus they promote non-hierarchal approaches to collectivizing. Their website, social media, and interviews, as featured across a variety of platforms, do not focus on one individual or a select group of organizers, and instead offer a communal image. I myself became familiar with Rainbow Noir via their platform on Facebook, but they also have their own website. On the home page, following their official statement are a series of projects split up into "Exhibitions, House of Noir, Pride and Publications." Following this are their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram handles and an email address. Contrasting against the official site of Canal Street, Rainbow Noir's site is bold in design and communicates artistic intent via the use of a photo collage with alternating panels. This is followed by a series of ten photo panels from their Instagram account which, at the time of my visit, included an exhibition,

an advert for a Black Pride Vogue Ball and a BBC News article headed “Manchester Pride faces racial prejudice claims.” The featuring of placards being held in the majority of photos contributes to a politicized aesthetic. Rainbow Noir are clear and overt in their intentions, mitigating potential uncertainty concerning who the group is for. They state: “please note membership of the Rainbow Noir group and attendance at our monthly meetings are for LGBTQI people of colour only. Our social events are open to SOFFAS (significant others, friends, family and allies)” (Rainbow Noir, Our Meet Ups, n.d.).

The events, which are hosted for a variety of identity groups, span many disciplines, mediums and interests. I have selected a variety to explore in the hopes of demonstrating the queer interruption Rainbow Noir make to Manchester’s LGBT narrative, simultaneously working to establish community and further the visibility of QPOC in Britain.

From August to September of 2019, Manchester’s Public Library played host to the exhibition *Journey*, curated by artist and curator Leo Hermitt. The exhibition was in collaboration with Superbia, an organization which offers free publicity to LGBT organizations holding events as well as aiding to set up the event. The show brought together a series of images, testimonies, artefacts, stories, belongings, and memories sought from Rainbow Noir to commemorate the group. One of the key stated aims of the exhibit was to “further the project of visibility for LGBTQI people of colour in our city” (Rainbow Noir: Journey, n.d.). Being held in a landmark building which is frequented by a varied and diverse public worked not only to increase visibility but also to entrench QPOC’s place within Manchester’s history. Further, the significance of a library as the chosen site for the show is arguably important, as libraries are viewed as a source of education and information yet do not fall prey to the issue of inaccessibility that other educational institutions are often accused of.

A notable part of the exhibition was an interactive installation which entailed audience members being offered the chance to share their own memories, journeys and experiences they felt were of significance. The interactive aspect of the exhibition, transforming the audience from viewer to participant, situated the audience member in dialogue with the collective. It acted as a means to validate their personal experiences and might be viewed to have offered a way to express that which was formerly inexpressible. Moreover, the organizers acknowledged that there may be some who don't yet feel able to attend the group or are marginalized from the LGBT community by aspects other than race but would like their voice heard in Manchester. This exhibition, in my opinion, provided such an opportunity. The group offered its members the chance to attend a special pre-launch, where the last few works were installed, and a social space where complimentary food and drink were available. Here the communal values of Rainbow Noir are clear, as the group members were offered the chance to come together to celebrate and collectively reflect upon their achievements prior to the show being open to the public.

As part of Black history month, Manchester theatre and gallery 'HOME' featured the photography exhibition *Rainbow Noir: Here* (August 2019 – October 2019). Manchester-based designer and photographer Tom Quaye's portraits of Rainbow Noir members provided a unique opportunity to encounter the faces often absent in historical portraiture. In a review of the exhibition, arts editor Chess Bradley poses the provocative questions, "How often do you see LGBTQI people of colour represented? How often are those stories and images positive?" (Bradley, 2019). Bradley (2019) goes on to write:

When marginalized communities are represented in the mainstream media, often it is the tragedy and violence that is captured. Tom Quaye's portraits of the volunteers for Rainbow Noir ... defy this narrative. The ten images ... are gorgeous and portray pure

unadulterated joy. Each portrait is taken in front of a Black backdrop, allowing the radiance of each volunteer to take centre stage.

While *Rainbow Noir: Here* poignantly contributes to the project of countering negative representation, I also read the exhibition of these portraits as an endeavor to interrupt the historical absence of queer racialized faces from art historical archives and further, as a means to make visible that which was formerly invisible. Traditional European portraiture has arguably contributed to maintaining historical class and race hierarchies by the practice of largely depicting wealthy, white faces. Quayle's exhibition, however, imparts value onto racialized bodies by deeming them worthy of photographing and being on public display, additionally, offering audiences from all backgrounds a chance to partake in celebrating the lives of those featured.

Manchester plays host to pen fight, an independent queer feminist art shop and small press. Set up in 2015, they focus on a variety of concerns and topics including feminist and women's rights, mental health and disability, art, and sustainability. In February 2017 they featured Rainbow Noir's zine making workshop on their online platform. Zines have become a well-established activist tool, finding particular resonance among social groups who are excluded from representation via mainstream media and culture. Aspects such as affordability make zines a very accessible and popular choice among activist groups as they can exist online and in print; additionally, they are far reaching, as many exist as downloads to be printed and distributed in people's hometowns. Zines have a far-reaching political history and continue to be successful today. Notably, in 2017, young arts-activists Layla Alter, India Salvador Menezes and Emma Holland created *The Repro Rights Zine* following president Trump's inauguration in the US. The zine provided information and advice on reproductive health services and rights across America.

A significant feature was that it was customizable to any State; further, it was inclusive of trans and gender non-conforming women. A key aim of the zine was to allow women to take charge of their own bodies in light of a political climate seeking to police women's bodies via reproductive policies and the election of anti-choice judges.

Rainbow Noir advertised their event as a “workshop for LGBTQI people of colour to explore their experiences; learn about the historical use of zines within social activism, and work to create zines that challenge racism and homophobia in the UK” (pen fight, 2017). The workshop was free to attend, and participants were offered the opportunity to have their zines digitized, becoming artworks within an exhibition Rainbow Noir was hosting. I find this arts-activist workshop particularly significant as it offers activists the training to go forth and produce their own creative zines and projects as a collective or independently. Further, providing a historic account of the use of zines within the UK deviates from US-centric narratives that often dominate activist accounts, thus contextualizing the work Rainbow Noir are doing within the United Kingdom.

Protest and art are integral aspects to this collective and continue to inform how they operate. In June 2017, Rainbow Noir issued a newsletter providing information on the plans of far-right group EDL (English Defense League), whose gay sect were organizing plans to spread racist and Islamophobic hatred along Canal Street. The EDL planned to do this on the anniversary of the mass shooting that had taken place at a gay night club in Orlando, Florida, killing 49—predominantly Latinx—people on June 12th, 2016. The email detailed a counter-protest activists in and around Manchester were planning. However, Rainbow Noir also detailed an upcoming meetup dedicated to talking through the recent political events that had taken place in the UK where attendees would have the chance to collectively create placards and banners to

take to the demonstration against the EDL. Creative protest banner workshops are a re-occurring feature the collective offers. The colourful banners and placards Rainbow Noir create often feature cultural semiotics and depict aspects and messages ensuing from historic liberation movements.

When contemplating the gay sect of the EDL, I find it helpful to consider homonationalism, elaborated on previously in the chapter, as a means to comprehend what position this group occupy. The intersection of occupying a minority position and harbouring nationalist ideology is complex. Ideally one would imagine groups could come together in their oppression to find an equal position of understanding and further the cause of one another collectively. However, as the history of feminism has elucidated, the hierarchies that permeate majorities find resonance within freedom movements and inequalities are often amplified as opposed to accounted for. Further, as could be considered when appraising the gay quarter of the EDL, minority groups may internalize and redistribute the oppressive ideologies that define their own position as a minority. Queer movements and communities take seriously the concept of positionality and privilege, seeking to rectify the othering of POC, women, trans, and differently abled people. This differs from binary LGBT movements and spaces that have historically (with exceptions) served the interest of able bodied cis-white groups, particularly, those of men.

Before I had Facebook, I was kept up to date with Rainbow Noir's news via their email newsletter. This is significant to mention as, though social-media platforms continue to grow in use, not everyone has, nor is in want, of social media accounts, and thus, it can render some excluded from a group or organization if that is their only means of operation. The newsletters are full of information concerning previous and future events and talks but also select events taking place in Manchester and the UK more broadly. The vast range of topics and concerns

covered by the events Rainbow Noir host and promote is in evidence in these letters. A notable example is the Intersectional Community Event held in June 2018. Open to all lesbian, bi, and non-binary women of colour, LGBT Foundation hosted an open discussion on navigating interracial relationships. The disclosure was overtly inclusive, stating women who are trans, older, neuro-divergent, disabled, of any faith or background are welcome; if anyone had concerns over accessibility, they were invited to make contact prior to the event. The chosen topic of discussion was a response to a previous event the LGBT Foundation hosted, on the topic of love and intimacy, at which the topic of interracial relationships had sparked great interest from attendees. Rainbow Noir's promotion of this event conveyed an open, inclusive attitude and understanding that its members may themselves be in interracial relationships.

Concluding all of their e-newsletters, Rainbow Noir highlight a range of other events and services that may be of interest. Examples include the free legal advice from Manchester's Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Network, and areas of law covered include Immigration, Debt, Employment, Family, and Tax. Further, they promote a therapeutic space for women of colour run by Suryaia Nayak, a practitioner with over 30 years' experience of women-only spaces working with gender, race and issues of sexuality. Finally, a member of Rainbow Noir had set up "TPOC Group," an informal group space for trans people of colour, and provided his email for any wishing to enquire about attending. Here we are able to see the holistic approach Rainbow Noir have adopted, in which they take seriously the interconnected parts that build up our lived experience. An arguable strength of the group is in supporting and encouraging sub-groups to organically form yet still be able to be a part of Rainbow Noir without being viewed as competing or as a conflict of interest. It can occur within activist collectives that sub-groups are

read as “splintering” from the main body and are thus outcast, often going on to create collectives entirely independent from the former.

There is a rich history of the use of activist newsletters in feminist and queer communities that far surpasses the digital forms of communication we often utilize today. Canadian communications scholar Cait McKinney traces how feminist networks were created and maintained through the circulation of small-scale print newsletters in her 2015 article “Newsletter networks in the feminist and archives movement.” Focusing on the 1977-1996 publication *Matrices: A Lesbian/Feminist Research Newsletter*, McKinney delineates how newsletters formed an essential basis of communication for feminist, lesbian and gay academics and activists working throughout the 1970s. During this era, loosely connected groups of academics, activists and researchers who were non-affiliated to institutions worked to produce newsletters that enabled the sharing of research and bibliographies; skills were additionally offered and sought after through these circulated materials. Members working within these groups simultaneously conducted their own research through oral histories and bibliographic methods, additionally working to build archives across North America and further afield. The archives enabled the housing of research otherwise difficult to find, in particular research related to queer and feminist activism. These projects were aided by the women’s studies departments that were coming to fruition at the time. Indeed, McKinney writes, “the establishment of university women’s studies departments and oral history methods in the 1970s and 80s provided early institutional support for this growing research field and generated new primary source materials for future study” (2015, p.311).

Other countries across the Global North were also actively producing lesbian-feminist print media. Commencing in 1963, The Minorities Research Group was the UK’s first

(successfully established) lesbian social and political organization. The group published the first copy of *Arena Three*, a political magazine for lesbian and bisexual women in 1964; during its peak, the publication had over 500 subscribers. Initially the content was designed by the collective; however, as the magazine grew in popularity, much of the content was contributed by readers. The last issue of the magazine was published in 1971. Taking influence from *Arena Three*, the first issue of *Sappho* was published in 1972. *Sappho* was highly political, highlighting emerging feminist theory and the activities of the Women's Liberation Movement in the UK at the time. Of the content, British Library curator Steven Dryden writes, "*Sappho* had a progressive feminist voice which was in keeping with the convergence of the ideas of gay liberation and women's liberation in the early 1970s" (Dryden, n.d.). The final issue was published in 1981.

Returning to *Matrices*, while the newsletters were gaining traction, McKinney details the challenge that lesbian-feminist archival practices posed to a movement that had formerly focused on historicizing the lives of gay men, noting, "However, the archives also found an uneasy home in a gay and lesbian historical movement noted for emphasising the histories of white, gay men" (McKinney, 2015, p. 312). The community archives established mailing lists, enabling the research being conducted to have the furthest reach possible. In addition to this, the newsletters were able to be photocopied by subscribers and further distributed throughout their communities. McKinney's article details the support *Matrices* offered to other emerging community archives, even publishing their requests for donations and primary research. The labour inherent in funding, researching, collating, creating, and circulating a newsletter is arguably a factor that cannot be ignored. I imagine the manual process of creating the newsletters contributed to the value the receivers imparted onto the object. The labour was divided among regional editors

across America. This division served multiple purposes: “this purposeful spread of editors ... points to a conscientious effort to create a network that would transcend the geography that made collaboration difficult” (McKinney, 2015, p.317).

McKinney provides two lines of thought when analyzing networks: one more conceptual, the second concerned with pragmatic operations. When delineating the former, McKinney writes, “the network is a conceptual model for imagining a kind of utopian feminist politic. ‘Network’ stands in for an idea of what a large, organised feminist movement could do” (2015, p.314). As many of the lesbian-feminists contributing to and benefitting from the newsletters, and, by extension, networks, were doubly marginalized on account of being both female and queer in the academy, it is not hard to envision the potential this new way of networking with others in similar positions offered. To this, McKinney posits, “imagined and accessed from these marginal spaces, the network represents a critical idealism that newsletter producers use to facilitate other kinds of collectivities from which to work collaboratively” (2015, p. 314). As feminism and LGBT studies are rooted in lived experience, the possibility for the newsletters to foster and further the activism occurring in the 1970s and 80s was perhaps a very motivating factor for those participating in the networks. The second consideration given to the networks focusses on the functional content contained within the newsletters. Subscribers were asked to complete a profile that included a short biography and detailed their research interests. Bearing in mind that contemporary professional databases, such as the commonly utilized Linked-in (an online platform for professionals to create profiles and make research and professional connections), were decades off being realized, we are able to see that the networks McKinney highlights were offering vital resources to marginalized groups, enabling them to share research and build relations.

The collaborative, community-based processes integral to the lesbian-feminist networks, newsletters and archives operating in the 1970s through to the 1990s are aspects I see in the organizational structure and processes of communication Rainbow Noir practice. The Manchester-based collective routinely advertise and run appeals for other organizations and collectives in a manner reminiscent of *Matrices*. Additionally, the non-hierarchical approach Rainbow Noir have adopted, which sees the collective always expanding, links, in my mind, to the multitude of editors *Matrices* employed. As the lesbian-feminists sought not to have their and other women's history lost and to provide archives of information inspiring future projects, this motivation is evident in the activities organized by Rainbow Noir and other QPOC collectives operative in Europe in the present day.

Within all of their promotion and hosting of events, one can deduce that Rainbow Noir give consideration to socio-economic inequality. Their events are always free, often providing food and drink, but they go a step further by obtaining tickets to a variety of events they can offer members on low incomes, additionally aiding people with travel expenses. This includes the annual trip they organize to UK Black Pride, which occurs in London. Rainbow Noir offer help with travel expenses and provide the contact details of Stonewall, an organization providing grant travel and food compensation for young people attending the event from outside London. Earlier in the chapter, I made the claim that Rainbow Noir mitigate identity-based exclusions by reflecting the unfixed, fluid space that constitutes the diaspora. I argue that both their events and the topics of the articles they share and critically engage with demonstrate this. One can view articles concerning religion, refugees, African activism, queer activism and achievements across the globe, local politics, Black British concerns, British South-Asian concerns, and QPOC art exhibitions and performances. These are just some of the topics covered. Topics that are not

confined to local geographies show a comprehension of the many places QPOC inhabit even if not physically. They also allow for translocal alliances to be made. Queer and Ethnic Studies Scholar Fatima El-Tayeb speaks to my thinking at a deeper level by examining translocal alliances in conjunction with the restaging of spaces within cities QPOC are interpolated to enact:

At the same time, these situated strategies of resistance are sustained through translocal alliances and shifting coalitions. Building on the decentering of the nation in transnational feminist scholarship, ‘translocal’ shifts the focus to the concrete conditions under which coalitional politics are created among groups whose relationship to state and nation is fraught. The local, and in particular the city, emerge as central concepts not because we privilege urban spaces but because patterns of postcolonial and labour migration render cities sites of a critical mass of racialized bodies. (Bacchetta et al., 2015, p. 773)

I have attempted to demonstrate the ways Rainbow Noir successfully interrupt the former narrative of Manchester’s LGBT population being confined to its gay village while furthering the project of QPOC visibility and representation both within and external to the city of Manchester. Working in conjunction with other organizations with the same goals of social equality for BAME and QPOC folk, Rainbow Noir only continue to advance and grow in strength, becoming more visible as a collective shaping the current history of Britain. Arts-based activism continues to be integral to the social responses and manifestations the group put out into the world and continues to be utilized as a tool to foster community.

Chapter 3: Performance, Performativity and QPOC

A large body of scholarship concerned with the analysis of queer performance has been produced, and while a handful of scholars, such as José Esteban Muñoz, focus on racialized artists, there continues to be a significant absence of QPOC as the focal point of scholarship. Indeed, this is also true for queer theatre studies and queer and gender theory more broadly. In their book published in 2015, *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*, editors Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier acknowledge they “do not have enough women’s or trans* voices, and the volume has a limited amount of ethnic or racial diversity, as would befit a volume about international queer practice” (p. 18). They proceed to draw attention to the white male dominance within the field. This, in an international anthology, demonstrates the critical need for a body of scholarship centralizing the many contributions, achievements and interventions QPOC are making via the utilization of performance.

This chapter looks to contribute to the disruption of a hegemonic analysis of queer performance by asking the question, what is at work when queer racialized feminists perform? I will begin by employing the works of scholars who break down the complexities of performance and “performativity.” I will then move on to focus on the nuances of race interacting with queer performance and performativity before looking at London’s the Cocoa Butter Club, an intersectional platform dedicated to showcasing performances by people of colour. My hope in doing this is to illuminate the importance of such works in aiding queer communities of colour to understand their own identities in relation to their histories and present while countering the erasure and oppressive forms of representation offered by mainstream platforms. Further, as many forms of expression integral to queer Black and Latinx history continue to be usurped by

white and other racialized gay communities who in turn marginalize Black and Latinx bodies, I will highlight the power of queer performers in claiming their own expression and refusing a universalizing of their histories via the creation of their own spaces.

As performance relies on the use of the human form, I believe it would be helpful to briefly look at queer identity as it is experienced by the body. In her 1993 essay, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” queer theorist Judith Butler helps to break down the multiple levels of performativity intrinsic to gay and lesbian identity categories. I would like to first be clear that this reference is not a call for a disavowal of identity groups (and, indeed, Butler acknowledges the political stratification often behind the taking up of an identity term), but more an examination of the *conditions* of an identity term. Homosexuality, incorrectly thought of as heterosexuality’s imitation is, Butler argues, an unspecific, indeterminate term which, while some, such as E. Patrick Johnson, argue, is often employed as an argument by academics to avoid the trappings of the essentialist/anti-essentialist argument, I find agency in thinking of queer sexuality in unquantifiable terms.

When providing an analysis of the performative utterance of “coming out,” Butler argues that the nature of naming the “I” in reference to a sexuality category is suggestive of an impossible totalization of I, and, at the same time, the impossibility that the subject can fully comprehend and exceed its determination when in essence, the signifier of gay/lesbian is always out of one’s control. She goes on to further problematize the suggestive, imagined space thought to constitute the “out,” arguing that rather than the supposed transparency and obviating of the closet, the closet is in fact reproduced, for out relies on in, and thus, each time one continues to come out, a reproduction of the closet is being employed. This I find particularly interesting when extending the analysis to incorporate a performer coming out on stage, shifting between

various visual signifiers of identity, warping any notion of certainty we may consider to be constitutive of a particular identity. I do not intend to use this chapter to debate the subject position, be that via offering a Foucauldian stance of always already being trapped in ideology, or evoking queer theorist Teresa De Lauretis, who called forward the feminist subject, a subject outside of ideology and one that must be undefined by heterosexual entrappings. However, I find it helpful to consider Butler's refusal to think of sexuality as determinate for this practice of considering sexuality as an indeterminate, unquantifiable construct arguably draws attention to the problematics of marking definitive, inflexible lines between insider and outsider.

My reading here leads me to believe Butler is also drawing our attention to the performative aspects of language. There is much power to be found in naming something, however, language which seeks to define even that which is fluid runs the risk of setting out very clear parameters of what does or does not constitute the thing that is being named. In his 2001 essay, "Quare studies or almost everything I learned about queer studies I learned from my Grandmother," E. Patrick Johnson delineates the ways in which "queer," especially as it is used in the academy, does not account for cultural identity variations or knowledge acquired from one's ethnic or racial background. Drawing from the memory of his working class, Southern, African American grandmother, Johnson recounts her expression "quare." She used the expression to denote that which was off-kilter, odd or unusual but also "to connote something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience" (Johnson, 2001, p. 3). In advocating for the use of this term, a term expressed by a homophobic family member, Johnson points to the nuances of sexuality and gender identification specific to those of us from racialized backgrounds. Quare as a term linguistically embodies memory,

history, class, and culture while accounting for an often difficult but very real truth: people of colour often cannot afford to simply cut ties with family members or community who disavow our sexual identities; in fact, we may even admire or idolize them. These people have often been our saviours, and, as Johnson points out when speaking of his grandmother, many of these people have radically advanced feminism and race equality, often through time periods during which binary LGBT movements have done little to improve race and class inequality. Johnson extends this point, noting that while his grandmother's homophobia "must be critiqued her feminist and race struggles over the course of her life have enabled me and others in my family to enact strategies of resistance against a number of oppressions, including homophobia" (Johnson, 2001, p. 6).

Importantly, the term's vernacular roots point to the performative aspects of language, taking the emphasis of queer from solely being a discursive concept to an embodied reality. Borrowing from Chicana feminist, activist and poet Cherríe Moraga and queer and feminist theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Johnson advocated for a "theory of the flesh." To elaborate, theories of the flesh look to "conjoin theory and practice through an embodied politics of resistance" (Johnson, 2001, p. 7).

To this, Johnson argues "many queer theorists, in their quest to move beyond the body, ground their critique in the discursive rather than the corporeal. I suggest that the two terrains are not mutually exclusive, but rather stand in a dialogical/dialectical relationship to one another" (Johnson, 2001, p. 7). One of my aims in writing this thesis is to further highlight the ways in which arts-based activism in its many variations can bridge the gap between the academy and grass-roots community organizations. In his essay, Johnson points to why this holds particular significance for queer people of colour. He suggests that, "failure to ground discourse in

materiality is to privilege the position of those whose subjectivity and agency, outside the realm of gender and sexuality, have never been subjugated” (Johnson, 2001, p. 12). In other words, the aspirations of white upper-class academics can only be furthered by a dismissal of materiality while the experiences of racialized and/or lower-class people continue to be silenced and excluded from the realms of queer discourse.

Johnson advocates for a theory of performativity within “quare theory” that would allow for a consideration of subjectivity and agency “(however momentary and discursively fraught)” (Johnson, 2001, p. 10). He posits that a way for this to come to fruition is for theories of performance to hold the same weight as performativity: “Performance theory not only highlights the discursive effects of acts, it also points to how these acts are historically situated” (Johnson, 2001, p. 11). It is clear that Johnson is not merely suggesting a shift in queer theory within the academy. He is calling for a radical praxis that accounts for people’s histories, class struggles and raced existence to be accounted for, a theory that can be simultaneously grounded in academia and in the work that needs to be done “out there.” Johnson provides examples of acts of performance that have furthered the project of Black and QPOC empowerment; notably, he states:

Vernacular traditions that emerged among enslaved Africans—including folktales, spirituals, and the blues—provided the foundation for social and political empowerment. These discursively mediated forms, spoken and filtered through black bodies, enabled survival. These resistant vernacular performances did not disappear with slavery. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color continued to enact performative agency to work on and against oppressive systems.

Later still, the black transgendered singer Sylvester transformed disco with his high soaring falsetto voice and gospel riffs. Indeed, Sylvester's music transcended the boundary drawn between the church and the world, between the sacred and profane, creating a space for other queer singers, like Blackberry, who would come after him. (Johnson, 2001, pp. 12-13)

In the section that follows, I introduce some contemporary examples of queer racialized performers operating in Britain today. Each of my case studies utilize aspects of their cultural heritage in addition to their gendered and queer identities to critique, challenge and rewrite dominant and damaging narratives. Johnson's insights show their use of performance forms part of a long genealogy of racialized people using performance methods to enact strategies of resistance; his thinking additionally provides a weighted understanding of the implications of the term queer remaining a purely discursive concept.

3.1 Refusing a universalizing of histories of cultural expression: The Cocoa Butter Club

Sites of performing queer identity have continued to hold a significant weight within queer communities, offering possibilities for us to explore, celebrate, challenge and even to provide a visual language to that which exceeds the spoken word. As Muñoz (1999) aptly writes:

There is a certain lure to the spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone, with or without props, bent on the project of opening up a world of queer language, lyricism, perceptions, dreams, visions, aesthetics, and politics. Solo performance speaks to the reality of being queer at this particular moment. More than two decades into a devastating pandemic, with hate crime and legislation aimed at queers and people of colour institutionalised as state protocols, *the act* of performing and theatricalizing queerness *in public* takes on ever multiplying significance. (p. 1)

However, as I have hopefully made cogent thus far, QPOC have historically been subject to an exclusion and disavowal of their lived realities which extends to queer spaces, including the stage in its various formations. Ironically, while white gay communities continue to celebrate Livingston's 1990 documentary film *Paris is Burning*, they seem less concerned with meditating on why the economically disadvantaged gay, trans and women predominantly of Black and Latinx heritage featured in the documentary were on the piers in the first place. Why they created alternative spaces and which gay and heteronormative communities disavowed and rejected their identities are key questions I will return to later in the chapter.

The Cocoa Butter Club opened its curtains for the first time in 2016. Based in London, it aims to celebrate performers of colour within cabaret and performance more broadly. The Cocoa Butter Club is overt in its celebratory stance on racialized cultural production, which becomes immediately clear in the mission statement found on the platform's website. Written in a seductive tone, the site states:

Wrapped in your favourite Neo-Soul, RnB, Motown, Blues and Jazz songs, discover Burlesque, Sideshow, Spoken Word, Live Music, Voguing and more; as The Cocoa Butter Club proudly provides a platform for performers of colour to exhibit culturally expressive work for us to revel in! (Welcome to the Cocoa Butter Club, n.d.)

I read the *us* not as a naïve notion of a monolithic *we*, but as an invitation for a multitude of people of colour originating from many different points of understanding to come together to form an audience. This reading is supported by the visual presentation of performers featured on the site who embody a diverse range of cultural semiotics, borrowing from a variety of both popular culture and subcultures. The photo panel depicting performers was created with the dual purpose to function as a directory for producers and event organizers. This approach

demonstrates the organization's awareness of the barriers and challenges POC performers face within the industry, which is addressed in the form of various initiatives, such as "networking hour," which the club hosts post-show. The motivations behind running the hour, the club states, are with the aim "to remove the notion that performers of colour do not exist/ are not creating/ are not applying for Cabarets and instead hold a mirror to productions, asking if they encourage performers of colour and the messages their art carries" (Welcome to the Cocoa Butter Club, n.d.). Although the Cocoa Butter Club is not an exclusively queer platform, they do play host to an array of QPOC performers, and networking hour demonstrates the club's attentive attitude to the over-arching exclusions racialized performers face. Their emphasis on taking an intersectional approach arguably suggests they are cognizant of the difficulties QPOC face in the wider queer community and the wider performance scene. I believe the intersectional approach also displays an awareness toward the complicated relationship many of us may navigate within our cultural communities.

Two performance disciplines the Cocoa Butter Club regularly cater to and which underpin an array of their events are voguing and burlesque. I draw attention to these two performance forms here, as I believe them to be of particular significance for QPOC in the recent past and present day. Serena Doherty explains that:

"The term 'burlesque' came to prominence in the 17th century, deriving from the Italian word 'burlesco,' itself from 'burla' meaning a joke or mockery. The term was used to describe this type of theatre during the Victorian era" (Doherty, 2013). Victorian burlesque was enjoyed by audiences in London theatres throughout the 1830s to the 1890s. Well established culture, such as Shakespeare plays and opera, were utilized as material that the performers parodied, often altering the script or lyrics to more humorous tones. Burlesque reached New York in the

1840s and was later popularized by the English dancer Lydia Thompson after her dance troupe, the British Blondes, toured in 1868. Thompson's performances were arguably radical for their time; the attire of the women was extremely risqué by Victorian standards. Further, Thompson's performances saw her female dancers assuming the roles of men, parodying patriarchal attitudes. American-born performer Mabel Saintley rose to fame and "was acclaimed for feminising the genre with her turn in *Mme, Rintz's Female Minstrels*" (Doherty, 2013). Saintley enabled a wave of Black performers, most notably in 1890 when *The Creole Show* became the first all-Black female minstrel show. Today, we would certainly consider the show to be racist, and I believe minstrel shows always have been racially offensive. It is, however, worth noting that the women of colour were able to deviate from traditional male minstrel routines that depicted a demeaning, unintelligent portrait of Black people to instead present a beautiful, sexy and dignified image. Many performers of *The Creole Show* went on to successfully write and direct their own dignified material that broke away from minstrel routines.

Burlesque began to progress into striptease routines, incorporating more elaborate and decorative costumes. The 1920s witnessed burlesque at its peak; during this era the performance gained immense popularity and, "It's argued that during this time burlesque was truly elevated as an art form" (Doherty, 2013). The showgirls of the 1940s were heavily impacted by censorship measures, and thus, many of the well-established performers left for Hollywood. The industry began to slowly decline until the 1990s, which saw a global revamp of the form, with dancers such as American model and performer, Dita Von Teese, rising to fame. The sexualized and teasing routines established during the 1990s became known as "Neo-burlesque" and continue into the present, often being altered and adapted, with new burlesque forms continuing to emerge.

The sexualization of the Black “exotic” female body, historically sedimented in western consciousness since the time of slavery, has been documented in scholarship and film. While there is a need to differentiate between the two, Orientalism, a concept coined by literature and postcolonial studies theorist Edward. W. Said (1978), additionally sedimented such thinking towards East and South Asian women’s bodies. Orientalism describes the prejudiced cultural representations and ideological beliefs held by the West concerning the East. Early Orientalist art and literary work portrayed the Eastern world in imaginative and exaggerated manners; the effects of this have largely contributed to the West feeling mastery over Eastern culture while perpetuating the idea of Eastern people as backward, exotic and uncivilized. European Orientalist paintings of the nineteenth century regularly depicted artists imaginings of Arabic Harems. These historical gendered and sexualized images have arguably contributed to the contemporary visual and spoken language the West utilizes when depicting Eastern women today. However, through dance and movement, women of colour have claimed authorship of their own bodies and sexuality; they have additionally utilized dance forms as a medium to confront multiple sites of oppression. Linguist and educator Angela Fatou Gittens (2012) examines how Black women incorporated dance as a key strategy in political activism across the Americas throughout the 1960s to the 2000s. When analyzing the 1960s, Gittens demonstrates how this era acted as a catalyst to enact shifts in the political use of dance for “Black bodies and Black working dancers throughout the United States” (Gittens, 2012, p.51). Gittens writes, “During these years of political tensions and uprisings, dance served a very specific and unique role especially within oppressive political systems as a physical medium that allowed the body to express what oppressed voices could not” (2012, p.51). When considering the sexualization of Black women’s bodies, Black women have used dance and physical movement as a vehicle to critique the

stereotypes and limitations imposed upon their bodies and additionally, to curate their own image. Similar strategies have been enacted by queer racialized bodies who possess a physicality that does not meet societal expectations.

Yet, burlesque shows remain remarkably white.¹⁵ I have been an audience member in the north and south of the United Kingdom and in North America and in each case this remained true. As a queer racialized woman who holds a performance practice, I am acutely aware of the physicality of performers when I am positioned as a viewer. In her 2019 article “Racism and Social Space in Canadian Dance: Actants, Structures, and Dancing Differently,” Erin Silver problematizes the notion of neutrality. This speaks to my experience as an audience member at the burlesque shows in the UK and North America. While I enjoy the shows and the agency placed upon female sexuality, I feel I am being asked to view the performers as “neutral,” rather than as white, and thus I recognize an embedded assumption that the audience are indeed able to be positioned as neutral spectators and not as marked bodies, cognizant of their own positionality, subjectivities, and historical genealogies.

In North America, I additionally attended contemporary burlesque, a dance form which borrows from traditional routines and semiotics. Among the 40-plus dancers, only two were visibly racialized. This, when considering the importance of dance forms and expression across a variety of Black cultures combined with the sexualization of the Black female dancer within popular culture, leads one to question the paucity of racialized bodies within the burlesque scene. When looking at the historical figures burlesque shows regularly draw from, such as Marilyn

¹⁵ There is much exciting POC and feminist activist interventions in burlesque however I am referring to “general” burlesque events when referencing overwhelmingly white performers.

Monroe or Marlene Dietrich, the absence of racialized bodies on stage transports the audience to the historical eras of Black bodies being relegated to perform in specific Jazz clubs and spaces *provided* for Black entertainment.

In response to this absence, or what the Cocoa Butter Club refer to as a “creative clap-back,” they provide a stage to a variety of exquisitely fierce burlesque shows and events. Miss Demi Noir is a mixed-race burlesque performer who has performed for the Cocoa Butter Club and UK Black Pride 2018. Noir is most recognized for her performative tribute to the 1920s dancer and civil rights activist Josephine Baker. Adorned with sparsely placed jewels, hair coiffed and set in place, Noir dons what has become an iconic garment: Baker’s banana skirt. With playfully mocking expressions, Noir engages the audience while moving in a sexualized manner, regularly turning away from the audience, shaking her hips to accentuate the movement of the skirt and her body. In reference to the performance, Noir confesses to feeling nervous, stating:

Today if you look at the routine it can be quite offensive: it’s a person of colour in a banana skirt pulling faces and dancing around. What I think is genius is that Baker was mocking the audience’s excitement and their fetishisation of black bodies. (Fearn, 2018)

I believe one could read the performance through the lens of disidentification, Baker refusing the positions offered to her and utilizing them instead as tools of protest. Baker’s performance might be read as an act of resistance in its reversing the role of performer/spectator; for it is her now mocking and observing the audience. I read Noir’s re-performing Baker, on a stage dedicated to POC, as a stance imbued with agency. The “us” the Cocoa Butter Club refers to are called into a collective remembering, a demand to recall the activists’ radical performance. The linkages between past and present both in relation to oppressive conditions, but also

strategies working against them, are brought to the fore, while a celebration of claiming Black female sexuality is offered. The bewildered audience of Baker's performance is replaced by appreciative actants who admire Black sexuality in its various manifestations while being open to receiving inspiration to contemplate how we can utilize each of our bodies to counter oppressive forms of representation. I selected Noir's performance for its ability to delineate the potential of burlesque in calling attention to the erasure of specific histories, in this this case, the Black women gracing the stage at the time of Monroe and Dietrich. 1950s-1960s African American singers such as LaVerne Baker or Ruth Brown, who both employed fierce aesthetics, certainly wouldn't be inappropriate on the burlesque stage. However, the club hosts a variety of similarly talented burlesque performers across a spectrum of racialized and QPOC bodies, which I believe highlights the potential of burlesque as a form of feminist arts-based activism able to claim sexuality and explore sexual expression via the bodies that have historically been stripped of that right.

The second performance form the Cocoa Butter Club caters to is voguing. This now-popularized, movement-based art form has its roots in the 1960s Harlem ballroom scene. The balls were created by and for predominantly queer Black and Latinx gay, women and trans underprivileged and marginalized individuals to perform their most fabulous selves. Seeming to subvert the hegemonic beauty ideals of the white women featured in fashion magazines such as Vogue, the performers emulated the poses splashed across the pages, adding unique movements such as "face" (which became its own category) for a panel of judges to score. Many of the people who frequented the scene were ostracized from the binary gay community and racially discriminated against in society more broadly. The ballroom gave credit to personal expression

while facilitating the building of community and networks of support especially for those part of a “House.”¹⁶

Madonna aided the mainstreaming of voguing through her 1990 hit *Vogue*, as did Livingston with her documentary *Paris is Burning*; however, while the dance form had been usurped far earlier, the past decade has seen a spectacularizing of the artform through such television programs as *Ru-Paul’s Drag Race* and binary LGBT community’s celebration and, indeed, adoption, of the expression depicted in Livingston’s documentary. However, the adoption of this expression by mainstream communities is, I argue, tainted with a lack of critical engagement. The subjugation of the figures depicted in the documentary is not a condition more economically privileged queer communities can replicate; thus it is more an attempt to de-platform the artform from its historical roots and by extension foster a detachment between the form and the bodies who lay claim to its history.

Shakona Fire is a London-based dancer, performer and drag artist who has performed with the Cocoa Butter Club, and often incorporates voguing into her performances. Being Black and femme-identified are two facets of her identity that heavily inform her practice. Fire is very open about the racism and ostracization she has experienced both within LGBTQ contexts and outside of queer scenes. Additionally, she has spoken about the difficulties she has encountered relating to being femme-identified in gay male spaces.

I find *Black Grindr* to be a particularly notable work of hers. In her 2016 variation of the performance, Fire looks fabulous in a shoulder length wig, jewel adorned thigh-length black

¹⁶ Upon joining a House, the member adopted the surname of the house “mother” and when performing, they represented that particular house. Many viewed the members of their house as their family.

dress, and black stilettos. Through the use of lip-syncing, Fire begins to explain to the audience that Grindr is a dating app for gay men looking to meet or, rather, hook-up with one another.¹⁷ The expressive gestures that accompany the lip-sync are reminiscent of voguing on account of the overly exaggerated manner in which they are executed. Fire moves on to detail that a key feature of Grindr involves “preferences.” She quickly progresses to explain the negative impact on racialized and othered bodies resulting from users of the app having unlimited freedom when selecting dating preferences. “No Blacks, no Asians, no fats, no femmes,” are included in the list of preferences Fire relays from previously viewed Grindr profiles. The dialogue of the lip-synch interchanges between voices; some are critical of the content, others defend it, and some involve conversations and debates between men. I later learned after reading an interview with Fire that the dialogue is from a YouTube video in which gay men react to racist and offensive Grindr comments and profiles. In Fire’s lip-sync, a justification given for statements including “no Orientals” pertains to the idea that sexual preferences are not racist but are simply what people favour. Fire then cuts to telling anecdotes about dating experiences she’s had on the app; all relate to her race and being a femme. The audience is informed that the image of a white man with a six-pack, an image popularized by gay media, is the general preference on Grindr. The audio cuts again as Fire begins to dance and lip-synch to the Electropop hit *Big Girls Cry* (SIA, 2014, track 2). The tune is stopped mid-way as Fire returns to sharing negative message exchanges on Grindr before the music re-commences.

In an interview concerning *Black Grindr*, Fire explains:

¹⁷ Lip-syncing refers to the act of silently moving your lips in synchronization with pre-recorded audio. Although it is pervasive in queer performance spaces, it also has a long history of being utilized externally across a variety of platforms and media.

On the gay apps, it's basically the same sign as no Blacks, no dogs no Irish. It just says no fats no femmes, no Blacks, no Asians. You're encountering, I guess, a more modernized version of racism; it's just on a smaller page and it's on your phone.

(Shakona Fire: 'Black Grindr,' 2019)

"No Blacks, no dogs, no Irish" refers to the sign commonwealth immigrant communities across Britain reported landlords and property agents affixed to buildings and pubs throughout the 1960s. I read the linkages between this historical sign, and the interactions occurring on modern technology, to highlight how racist ideology always finds new articulations and is able to adapt to our current modes of operating. Further, there is the suggestion that such exclusionary attitudes never disappeared. Rather, policy and a shift in societal attitudes simply resulted in it becoming socially unacceptable to publicly hang a sign banning an entire race from a property. Many online platforms are uncensored, even when otherwise stated. The internet additionally provides a space for users to express that which they would perhaps never say in the presence of another person. An arguable issue that arises here concerns reality and "virtual" space. Virtual space, including phone applications, can, I believe, allow users to feel a disconnect from "real life." As expressed by Fire, however, the conversations that occur in virtual space have real life consequences, and in fact there is, I would argue, not an absolute separation between the virtual and the real.

Queer Black performance artist Lasana Shabazz is also a performer who has developed a work in response to the identity exclusions present on Grindr, and has performed with the Cocoa Butter Club. The work sees Shabazz, dressed in a black corset and jockstrap, gold chest armour, and matching gold trainers, confidently walking to the stage to deliver his 2016 performance work *No Fats, No Fems, No Blacks, No Asians*. As the performer looks out onto the audience in

an almost confrontational manner, he breaks into a voguing routine. This is cut off after a couple of minutes as he approaches a microphone placed in the corner of the stage. Shabazz begins to deliver a spoken word piece in which he confronts the multitude of exclusionary preferences on Grindr, before declaring: “I am not a box. You cannot tick me or overlook me. You cannot categorize, nor summarize me with your western colonial narrow spectrum of white beauty” (Shabazz, 2016). Within the spoken piece, Shabazz progresses to confront toxic masculinity and pervasive ideas within gay male spaces surrounding the privileging of “straight acting” behaviours. Shabazz declares to the audience that they can be free, if they desire; they do not have to be pigeonholed if they can embrace their own differences and accept those of others.

I find the use of voguing to be a particularly effective medium in the two performance works I have outlined. The confident and fabulous aspects of the dance form are imbued with agency and act as a contrast to the difficult subject matter both Shabazz and Fire address. Through this agency lies a refusal to back down or conform to the societal pressures each performer describes. Through the incorporation of voguing, a comparison is drawn between the historical exclusions faced by the queer racialized bodies from Harlem’s ballrooms and the current exclusions Fire and Shabazz each outline.

As part of their mission statement, The Cocoa Butter Club announce:

As Creatives, when faced with the issues of cultural appropriation, lack of representation and even black-facing in cabaret, we had no choice but to create!- create something beautiful in response. So, we set up the alternative option for those who don’t want to see trivialising, appropriating or clowning of our cultures, but perhaps experience how fabulous our histories and cultures are, as told by us. (Welcome to the Cocoa Butter Club, n.d.)

The adoption of voguing by anyone and everyone arguably renders the conditions which constituted the lived experience of those in the *Paris is Burning* as trivial. Returning to my earlier analysis on the performative aspects of language, we have seen the linguistic expressions and gesticulations particularly inherent to African American women, appropriated by mainstream cultures in line with the appropriation of voguing. As music and media scholar Brian Currid argues when looking at the historical and contemporary importance of house music to queer Black understanding, “ironically, as Black-identified music styles continue to dominate the dance floor, the racist practices of clubs and bar owners who insist on asking the Black queen for two forms of ID – continue with a frightening consistency” (Case et al., 1995, p. 176). Indeed, the practices of LGBT venues that host voguing events continue to marginalize racialized bodies. I read the Cocoa Butter Club’s hosting of balls and events as a refusal of a mainstreaming, thus universalizing an art-form which is historically contingent on the conditions that produce and perpetuate the marginalization of queers and trans folk of colour. By providing a stage centering QPOC, the Cocoa Butter Club also provides a space for performers to ground themselves in what are unequivocally their own histories and present(s) while providing the opportunity to conjure future imaginings. This in turn allows for the creation of a queer narrative where QPOC aren’t marginalized or present only as a source for consumption but are central to the scene and story they wish to tell. The performance form that is voguing, I argue, is one that holds significant potential for us to use our historic and present conditions to alter the narrative to read how we would like, both imaginatively and literally, while radically empowering othered bodies.

The stages I reference throughout this chapter do not always conform to traditional notions of a stage, such as those in a theatre with a seated audience. Instead, they may reside in a queer club environment, sometimes elevated and other times part of the dancefloor which is

activated as a stage by the grouped formation of an audience into one space to create a clearing on the floor. The dancefloor, found within queer communities, has continued to hold relevance and offer radical arts-activist potential. Indeed, when appraising American artists Wu Tsang and Leilah Weinraub, Silver (2019) asserts that the artists “offer the dance floor as a social space of worldmaking, notably as it serves communities of queer people of colour” (p. 95).

A unique strength of vogue, particularly “Old way,” was the emphasis on confidence and creativity over formal dance training. This made it an accessible form, esoteric in its necessity of an embodied understanding of queer, class and racialized subjugation rather than a working knowledge of or training in dance. This arguably empowers viewers to feel licensed to create and “express” in their own lives, extending to the dancefloor. While looking specifically at the history of House, Currid’s essay touches upon many points intrinsic to my argument surrounding the agency of voguing for QPOC and the importance of the space clubs like The Cocoa Butter Club are creating. Currid views the position of the racialized club-goer as “authorial, spectatorial and spectacular. The dancer in the club finds herself not as consistently engaged in one strategy of embodiment, but rather is constituted through a sort of oscillation between these three points” (Case et al., 1995, p. 177).

He goes on to assert:

the listening practices and strategies of the club goer herself, gestures in the dance [...] the pleasures constituted are those of creation, inscribing an alternative narrative of community and identity history, written on the space of the body and traced through the available spaces on the dance floor. (Case et al., 1995, p. 177)

This is useful in considering the positionality of audience members who are present at QPOC performances. Within the club atmospheres, the audiences present in queer clubs oscillate

between dancing and watching, depending on the performance, and their responses can be thought of as marking key points within queer history “by marking certain songs, certain gestures, as rooted within the mythical past of queer community belonging” (Currid, 1995, p. 179). Shifting briefly to a British context; *Go West*, covered by Pet Shop Boys, is an appropriate example here. Originally released in 1979 as a disco hit by the American group Village People, Pet Shop Boys’ 1993 anthem was initially performed at an AIDS benefit at Manchester’s Hacienda club and was consequently released as a single. The song became a British gay anthem, with the music video being nominated for a Grammy award. When played in the context of LGBT dance venues, many dancers who may not have been born before the AIDS epidemic are metaphorically transported to the past; they are moved to nostalgically reflect upon past trauma and loss within queer communities but also, on the past activism, insurgency and communal care those communities enacted.

By continuing to hold Vogue Balls and events in QPOC communities or communal spaces, we are gesturing to our localities and geographies and refusing the call for our histories to become “an object devoid of local specifics and designed for universal consumption” (Currid, 1995, p. 174). Currid’s insights, to my mind, sit parallel to Johnson’s considerations regarding “theories of the flesh.” Both scholars allow for the interweaving of performance forms and academic theory to align in a non-hierarchal fashion; additionally, they delineate the significance this dialogue holds for QPOC. Currid specifically, highlights how inequalities are maintained by the consumption and appropriation of racialized cultures.

Black feminist scholar bell hooks offers a critical intervention that, in my opinion, aids in the consideration of how we might mitigate being defined by the consumption of our lived experience while still critically engaging with QPOC performance.

In her 1992 essay “Is Paris Burning?” hooks provides an important critique of Livingston’s documentary, addressing the problems intrinsic to the film and looking at the performative aspects of Black drag, which she expands upon to incorporate and connect with global positions of POC. This text is particularly helpful in considering performative actions by QPOC/POC for how it carefully explicates the past and continued consumption of Black subjectivity and expression by dominant groups.¹⁸

Cross-dressing and gender fluid presentation are generally thought to be subversive, transgressive actions. I would add they are also thought to be actions that release “everyone” from the chains of binary understandings and performances of gender. Hooks opens with a recollection of a time when overt misogyny was governing her life. She describes the performative ability to traverse the plains of powerlessness to a position of privilege by relinquishing the visual presentation of Black womanhood for one of masculinity during such patriarchal times. This empowering act was contrasted against the depiction of Black male comics, such as Eddie Murphy, dressing as Black women, which manifested as a site of extreme disempowerment in their mocking and perpetuating stereotypes of Black womanhood to amused audiences. The comedians worked to reinscribe racist and sexist public opinion, and while, as hooks notes, one may argue they were disempowering notions of Black masculinity, it was at the ridicule and expense of Black women and, thus, it can arguably not be thought along subversive nor empowering lines. Further, disempowerment being represented as femininity only acts to reinscribe the patriarchal, heterosexist notion that for men to present as women is an act of loss, a

¹⁸ Judith Butler additionally addressed *Paris is Burning* in her 1993 essay, “Gender is burning: Questions of appropriation and subversion.” The essay differs from hooks on account of its focus on class instead of race, positing that the transwomen featured were trying to achieve what they considered to be “real life” as opposed to whiteness.

move toward losing the powerful part of yourself. The public popularity of these Black comedians would perhaps not have been a given if they were portraying powerful performances of Black womanhood that challenged the imaginations and beliefs of audiences.

I have included this particular example as it is important to be cognizant that it is naïve to assume drag or crossdressing is inherently anti-phallogentric and anti-patriarchal. In fact, hooks refers to the ideas of feminist theorist Marilyn Frye (1983) to argue that the depiction of exaggerated femininity adopted by drag queens and gay men has often been approached as a toying with femininity for sport where one can exercise control and ownership over the feminine without necessarily displaying respect or appreciation for the oppressed group, in this case, women. Frye (1983) argued, “This femininity is affected and characterized by theatrical exaggeration. It is casual and cynical mockery of women, for whom femininity is the trapping of oppression” (as cited in hooks, 1992, p. 148). Indeed, the linguistic expression “fish,” to mean, women (and which stems from ballroom culture) and the consistent use of the word “bitch,” often used by drag queens in popular culture, is extremely negative. In order for gender performativity to be empowering for QPOC, it cannot be at the expense of, nor rely on, the disempowerment or subjugation of others.

The ways in which Black bodies performatively interact with whiteness may produce sites of confrontation by subverting and appropriating aspects of dominant culture. This consideration, hooks argues, is largely absent from the documentary *Paris is Burning*. The queens and transwomen featured in the documentary idolize and covet white femininity, and the “dream” unilaterally expressed in the film is to be the white women walking down the highstreets or on the cover of magazines. When responding to a film review in which the reviewer accredits any tragedy depicted in the film as stemming from the queens “knocking

themselves out to imitate the members of a society that won't have them," hooks argues this to be an over-simplistic and surface level reading. Instead she suggests:

Much of the tragedy evoked in the film is evoked by the willingness of Black gay men to knock themselves out imitating a ruling-class culture and power elite that is one of the primary agents of their oppression and exploitation. (hooks, 1992, p. 150)

Hooks suggests that the absence of an interrogation of whiteness in *Paris is Burning* partly accounts for the overwhelming popularity of the film among white audiences. When she and a fellow Black female friend attended a screening of the film, they were surrounded by what hooks describes as "yuppie-looking, straight-acting" gay men. While hooks and her friend, as Black women, felt the heartache of seeing the impoverished, marginalized conditions faced by communities of QPOC being realized onscreen, the audience engaged in joyful laughter and wonderment, expressing how much pleasure the documentary gave them. Upon hearing such rhetorical questions such as, "didn't you love that?" hooks writes:

And no, I didn't just love it. For in many ways, the film was a graphic documentary portrait of the way in which colonized Black folk (in this case Black gay brothers, some of whom were drag queens) worship at the throne of whiteness, even when such worship demands that we live in perpetual self-hate, that we steal, lie, go hungry, and even die in its pursuit. The "we" evoked here is all of us Black people/people of colour, who are daily bombarded by a powerful colonizing whiteness that seduces us away from ourselves, that negates that there is beauty to be found in any form of Blackness that is not imitation of whiteness. (1992, p. 149)

The seduction of "moving away from ourselves" is something I advocate for QPOC/POC performers on and off stage to take seriously and meditate on when considering how and what

they are to present. Returning to my earlier analysis of burlesque, the power of Miss Demi Noir, I argue, partially resides in her not assuming the identity of the fabulous white women from the past. Instead, she locates the power and beauty that derives from the fabulous Black women of the same time period and draws audiences' attention to their lives.

When considering how we might move past white-centred notions of performance and performativity, perhaps at least a step toward this would be to stop performing, imitating, and, in turn, coveting whiteness. Instead, I advocate for us to engage in more critically subversive performances as they relate to whiteness. When considering theory, I have elected here to draw from hooks as opposed to Butler. This in part is because as POC/QPOC, I believe we need to stop consistently referencing whiteness in order to reflect upon our social/cultural/political positions, but also because the insight hooks provides is derived from her standpoint as a Black woman who grew up in a Black community.

This point leads me to examine notable interwoven insights hooks brings into focus that I believe partially explain the current usurpation of vogue by dominant groups. Livingston herself is a white lesbian who depicts Blackness through the lens, quite literally, of whiteness. Although viewers may imagine she is an invisible spectator simply observing queer Black and Latinx life, in fact she is a director who elects what scenes to keep, what to edit out, what questions to ask and what subjects to avoid. At no point do we gain a sense of her responsibility, or an awareness of her own positionality. As Jin Haritwarn (2008) importantly reminds us, "an empirical project which takes seriously the question of positionality can enable us to directly

‘touch/interact/connect’ with subjects, in ways which are less exploitative, less objectifying, and more politically relevant” (p. 3).¹⁹

We also surely must remember the colonial and imperialist violence ensuing from the supposed act of assuming the position of “neutral spectator.” Indeed, the periodical *National Geographic* apologized in 2018 for their longstanding damaging contributions to this. The decades that the periodical devoted to photographing its subjects, specifically, those from the Global South, was evocative of visual and written descriptions provided in Victorian travel writing. The photos in the periodical only served to fuel damaging western imaginings of the other.

Hooks further contends that Livingston does not take responsibility for how racism might inform the ways audiences will read what they are seeing on screen. I know from various conversations I’ve partaken in that not all, but many non-Black audiences experience uncritical pleasure from viewing the documentary. This pleasure, hooks offers, stems from the heightened focus on pageantry and from “celebration” being the tone that the lifestyle and balls are depicted through. Even when the young transwoman Venus is murdered, Livingston does not dedicate time to any collective mourning her community may have felt or expressed; “having served the

¹⁹ *Paris is Burning* was rereleased with the inclusion of unseen footage on February 25, 2020. The New York Times provided excerpts from email exchanges and an interview Livingston conducted relating to the rerelease. A notable question posed to Livingston was: “How do you respond to the criticisms of people, like Judith Butler and bell hooks, who feel you exploited the ballroom culture for your own benefit?” Additionally, problems of cultural appropriation were posed to the director. I find her answers perfectly delineate a lack of ethical understanding when considering the roles and power disparities between a director and their subjects. Livingston states: “I guess the core of these criticisms is: ‘Jennie went on to be a filmmaker, while the people in the film stayed where they were.’ I think yes, there’s a class system, and we live in it. But filmmakers don’t change that system; we comment on it. It’s up to other people to change it” (George, 2019). This answer completely evades any sense of responsibility and presupposes a knowledge of racial subjugation from the audience. Further, this answer displays a lack of comprehension relating to the criticisms regarding her positionality. The fact that those featured in the documentary were not emancipated from poverty *on account* of featuring in the documentary, was not the main criticism posited by hooks or Butler.

purpose of ‘spectacle’, the film abandons her ... to put it crassly her dying is upstaged by spectacle. Death is not entertaining” (hooks, 1992, p. 155). The focus on pageants falls into the trap of aesthetic pleasure overtaking and marring the weight of the positions being depicted. Perhaps the lack of criticality Livingston engages in stems from an inability to allow ethical questions to guide her practice, a practice that has seen her become the beneficiary of being the director of an award-winning documentary. This raises the question: who was the documentary made for? Perhaps a film made by a white director depicting Black and Latinx queers chasing white ideals, seeming to believe that whiteness is the only means to realize money, success, beauty, and, more broadly, “themselves,” has resulted in dominant groups feeling ownership over the content, including the medium of voguing itself.

These important insights do not, I believe, strip voguing of its agency nor its potential as a performance form. Instead, I argue, as much of our history has been erased or condescendingly recorded, these have nevertheless been the ways audiences have come to engage with the medium. Just as QPOC have refigured and reframed histories to find agency and imagine futurity, I fail to see why the same cannot be true for voguing. I certainly would advocate for rejecting whiteness as being the epicentre of what is performed; additionally, we could rethink the position of spectator so that it is less a position of a judge at a sporting event rearticulating the male gaze and instead one conceived of as forming supportive, empowering audiences. As explored earlier in the chapter, platforms such as the Cocoa Butter Club are offering QPOC the opportunities to create such spaces and a sense of audience relationality. Within the ballroom scene, I locate power in QPOC forming community, taking care of each other and, irrespective of the salient critique hooks offers, in creating a performance form entirely unique to them. This is

not something to dismiss but rather, I argue, an example where we must work to de-centre whiteness from our understanding and physical articulations of performance and performativity.

Chapter 4: Collective Communal Existence: Finding Your Way in the Academy

It is 2018 and I'm captivated by an article in the popular British fashion, music, art and culture publication *i-D magazine*, which reads: "calling all queer womxn, trans and non-binary artists of black ancestry! this new show wants you" (Kuchenga, 2018).

In recognition of the exclusionary, elitist, and often hostile terrains queer Black artists have traversed, the founders of queer Black British activist collective BBZ, whose acronym stands for Bold Brazen Zamis, and racialized arts-activist group *sorryyoufeeluncomfortable* (SYFU) collaboratively hosted an alternative graduate show. The aim was to "provide a space for artists to be their fullest selves in the presentation of their work, and for audiences to view their work in a space that does not pathologize or other their identities" (Kuchenga, 2018). The show, held in South London's Copeland Gallery, was open for 10 recently graduated Queer womxn, trans or non-binary artists of Black ancestry to exhibit their works, encouraging artists residing outside of London to apply. A chance for the artists applying to work through and recontextualize their previous experiences, the show, and the build-up to it, additionally provided a space for communal existence and connections to be made. Keen to establish critical lines of mentorship, the artists had access to elder members and active figures within POC and queer artist communities. One is able to observe the influence of the historic arts-activism referenced earlier in my thesis; the collaborative, collective formation of BBZ and SYFU is reminiscent of the BLK Arts Group and, indeed, I read the title of the show to be a nod towards the group's continuing legacy.

This chapter will consider the relationship between arts-based activism and the academy/scholarship, the choices of representation utilized by the two collectives, and the importance of collective, communal existence for QPOC. My bachelor's degree in fine art is where I developed my queer performance practice. I began to realize the only way to talk about the intersecting concerns I had regarding my Jamaican ancestry, my queer identity, and physicality was through the body. Utilizing the "thingness" inherent in the corporeal allowed me to queer societal expectations of the sexualized Black feminine body while using my androgyny to challenge the hyper-masculine, heterosexual expectations cast upon the body of the Black male. Through my contextual modules, I read Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1950), which aided me in furthering an understanding of thingness and spatial relation. Alongside this, while reading queer theory and cultural studies, including texts by Jack Halberstam and Judith Butler and interviews with Del LaGrace Volcano, I experienced an organic link between what may seem like two bodies of work completely abstract from one another. This link furthered my practice and I began to situate my body in the local geographic terrain of Britain while facilitating linkages with the historic geographies intrinsic to my cultural and sexual identities. American cultural theorist Jennifer Doyle and American art historian David Getsy allude to this queer feminist process of art making when they write that, "queer/feminist art practices will hover over the thingness of the body as a way of exploring the weight and history of that body, as a way of exploring the politics of making bodies into things, and things into bodies" (2013, p. 63).

The faculty of my department were very supportive and offered a critical lens to facilitate praxis development while steering me in the right directions to gain inspiration from queer feminist artists and performers. I was particularly fortunate to connect with a feminist member of the faculty who specializes in philosophy, histories of feminism, and performance art.

Additionally, I was fortunate to connect with a lecturer who worked alongside the BLK art group in the 1980s. The department also provided me the opportunity to perform in the context of the gallery space. This arguably allowed for a radical intervention to be made in what was a majority white and de-politicized studio, exhibition, and performance space while provoking me to consider the history of “the white walled” gallery.

While I am forever grateful for my three-year studio experience, the positions I, at times, came to exist in rendered my racial and gendered historic and present understanding as inconsequential in the minds of those in question. After a series of voguing and queer performances for camera works I had created, a queer cis-white male in the program decided to adopt various aspects of my expression. This included voguing and utilizing Black women’s contributions to the global music industry, which he, in turn, inserted into his practice. While the majority of students in my cohort were supportively shocked and considered the move one of usurpation and “stealing” of my ideas, from my standpoint, it went a lot further. I felt it was not just my ideas being taken; it was the facets that build up my identity being trivialized and viewed as a material for indiscriminate consumption. Linking to the concerns explored in my previous chapter, it also acted as an attempt to universalize the specificities of a history that underpins QPOC’s position in the present. Further, a previously graduated queer white-cis male had no qualms about telling me his performance practice stemmed from finding his “inner Black woman” before proceeding to ask me if I’d ever read Maya Angelou. He developed his practice while a student in the institution I attended. His lack of criticality and inability to consider his privileged positionality hints to an absence of colonial, racial and gendered oppressions being acknowledged or challenged from within the walls of the art academy. The inequalities between white and racialized LGBTQ communities that I have explored thus far in this thesis, and such

community's reception in the "art world," is arguably something the academy needs to take seriously and challenge, especially when interacting with queer art practice.

My hope in sharing these experiences is to provide context to the radical possibilities the alternative-grad show is creating while meditating on exactly what it is they are offering that would have been helpful in processing the above experiences. I will now refer to art theorists Adrian Piper and Lowery Stokes Sims to aid me in situating the place of women of colour in the history of the art academy, and the art world, before introducing the two collectives I examine.

4.1 Arts-based activism: An alternative graduation

The rejection of Black, particularly Black women, artists from Western art institutions, (which inevitably produces inherently derivative readings of their works) is by no means a new phenomenon. To understand the structures under which contemporary Black women artists, queer or otherwise, operate within, it is helpful to consider historic explications of these conditions. I have selected key accounts provided by Black female artists and curators working throughout the 1970s to the 1990s which I will briefly explore before moving onto my contemporary case studies. I have selected this time period, as critical interventions were being made throughout these years. A global link can be made here, between the struggles of these women in the Americas and that of Rashaed Araeen in Britain in the decade previous, and referenced in chapter two of this thesis.

In 1983, African American performance artist Lorraine O'Grady stated, "at the moment, individual black performance artists are still exotic oddities" (Sims, p. 207). Here, the complexities of being a Black woman in the art world and a Black performance artist were being addressed, in particular, how the reception Black performance works were receiving was suggestive of an incompatibility. In her provocative 1988 essay, "Aspects of Performance in the

Work of Black American Women Artists,” Black feminist artist and critic Lowery Stokes Sims writes about this time, noting that O’Grady’s observations were “verified by the controversy and resistance that met a presentation by this writer in a panel discussion on contemporary black American artists in 1985 concerning black women doing performance art” (Sims, 1988, p. 207). Sims details the jeering, dismissive comments articulated by the predominantly Black middle-class male artists in attendance, artists who held somewhat conservative practices utilizing more traditional art mediums. These comments were contrasted against an overwhelmingly positive reception from the younger POC women in attendance who, Sims shares, detailed the hostility they had each faced from their professors.

Sims offers a potential understanding of the conservative male artists whose views sit in relation to capital and the issues of economic gain Black artists continue to have to navigate. As performance and live artists have tended to deviate from linear economic goals, live practice has, in comparison to other art forms, remained vastly uncommodified, which may have been a site of contention for the men. However, the freedom of not being reliant on, nor having their practices dictated by, the male dominated art market, and not having to rely on acceptance into art institutions such as galleries and museums, perhaps in part illuminates the liberation Black women discovered in performance art and video. The fact that women were the leading figures in live practice may have additionally contributed to the suspicion the genre elicited. The artists Sims reviews were highly politicized in stance. Using their practices as a vehicle to communicate with their communities, they simultaneously reflected the concerns and inequities those very communities faced. One such artist, Adrian Piper, cogently helps to delineate Black women’s positions in the art historical timeline, art institutions, and the art world more broadly in her 1990 essay, “The Triple Negation of Coloured Women Artists.” Addressing the politicized time of her

writing, Piper draws a parallel between societal attempts at refuting the diversity and equality being fought for and the art world's reassertion of Eurocentric, heterosexual, male aesthetics and inclusion. She uses her essay to argue that:

The ideology of postmodernism functions to repress and exclude CWAs from the art-historical canon of the Euroethnic mainstream. Correctly perceiving the artefacts produced by CWAs as competitors for truth and a threat to the cultural homogeneity of the Euroethnic tradition. (Piper, 1990, p. 161)

After delineating unquestionable examples (ranging from 1982-1990) of gendered racism inhibiting CWAs' success, Piper argues that unfortunately ignoring the unfounded sentiments of critics and other artists was not an option, for the sway and support they were generating was growing and impacting too many factors. As some brave and conscientious art reviewers and critics began to address both the works of CWAs and the gendered racism affecting them, a change began to occur, and group shows by such artists started to be reviewed.

While encouraged by this, Piper relays her suspicion of this new concern, for a corresponding interest in "difference" and "otherness" had commenced across a variety of other disciplines, such as comparative literature, history and anthropology. I sympathize with this concern, as the current interest in queer has arguably quickly become tokenistic and feels unsustainable when we review who is already being marginalized from being considered interesting. While art discourse had focused on the artefact *or* artist, what was required to comprehend the works of CWAs, to my mind, was an analysis of the artwork and an awareness of social relations. The problem however, as Piper aptly puts it, was that "the object of preoccupation is not the artefact but rather its producer as 'other'" (1990, p. 164). Such a preoccupation has tended to favour gendered and racial stereotypes which then act to encroach

upon how audiences read the work. The focus I advocate for requires a self-reflexive critical approach from the art world that asks for self-scrutiny that is contained and does not spill over into the reading of the works.

I cannot do Piper's essay justice in such a short space; however, I believe it to be of importance to briefly break down her explanations of the barriers CWAs face. I previously cited otherness. The Euroethnic art canon fails or, rather, refuses acknowledgment that we are not othered to ourselves but, rather, it is them who have othered us. Thus, when we choose to explore this relation in our work, we are, Piper argues, investigating Euroethnic psychosociology, not *ourselves*. Thus, when the art world insists on withdrawing focus from the work and recasting it upon the artist, they are evading self-scrutiny and instead placing all weight and focus on the artist in the guise of what they will deem is the artist's "self-expression." Secondly, the focus on otherness accompanied with a dismissal of an engagement with the meaning of the work "falsely presupposes a background of Euroethnic homogeneity against which the person can be identified as an 'other'" (Piper, 1990, pp. 165-166). As Piper saliently asserts, this only aids the "ideological myth of minority status that racists have long clung to when exercising strategies of disempowerment" (Piper, 1990, pp. 165-166). Finally, the intersection of race and gender means CWAs are facing a double discrimination. As with the battles feminism has undertaken to adopt intersectional and transnational approaches, it is damaging when art critics generalize in such assertions as "all women" or "all queers." Even within racial and ethnic groups, we are, of course, heterogenous and inequalities exist amongst us. However, what Piper argues as particularly relevant to this point is that we are subject to being doubly othered and, thus, the access to reading and focusing on our work and *not* on us is made even more challenging.

As Piper progresses to problematize the art market's domineering control over art production and the issue of financial worth equating to validity, she offers us hope by suggesting we refuse to negotiate our agency. Piper warns us not to compromise our inspirations, practices, relationships, and potential in favour of rearticulating Euroethnic ideas in order to be marketable. Instead, she points to the intellectual (over entrepreneurial) reward that ensues from political and conscious practices that connect, challenge, disrupt, and provoke. Piper reminds us of the satisfaction experienced when utilizing the free or affordable resources around us to create and, further, of concentrating on the rewards one reaps from transforming an audience and building authentic connections. The arts-activist collectives I begin to analyze throughout the proceeding pages of this chapter embody such commitments. "Playing the game" and reaping the rewards of finance and notoriety certainly do not underpin their commitments; however, as they find strategies to aid Black women and non-binary artists to exhibit their works, they haven't abandoned all notions of success. Rather, I argue that they are creating new pathways to that point and helping to redefine how we rank and rate success.

My aim in the introduction to this chapter has been to familiarize my reader with the unwillingness of the art world to allow for the interruption Black women have made and continue to make to the hegemony of the Euroethnic art canon. This knowledge, I hope, will provide a context for the significance of the collectives I will now explore.

Organizers from the two collectives BBZ and SYFU came together with the desire to alter the realities recently graduated queer Black artists previously had to process alone. Their interviews in *i-D* and art, fashion and culture magazine *Dazed* delineate the exclusions, appropriations, and othering inherent in art academies. The narratives illuminate the experience of being made to feel out of place and of always being perceived as "the exception" to your race.

The collectives are cognizant as to how these experiences complicate our relationship to graduation. A ceremony which is representative of achieving, of being ready to enter the next steps in life—in other words, a ceremony of pride—also functions as a commemoration of being an alumnus of an institution that has disqualified certain existences and knowledges; for some, graduation is more a celebration of survival. In addressing the complexities of the ceremony, BBZ state:

With less focus on what we study and the conditions we study in, the beaming faces that greet us after graduating are laced in conversations of our generational privilege and access to education but dismiss the negative impact of being in those spaces.

Heteronormativity and capitalism work hand in hand, reminding us that success is in direct correlation with income and social position, as queer black creatives we do not fall into those brackets. (Jamal, 2019)

Democratizing how we approach the handling of exhibitions and openings, I argue that the collectives were able to extend this approach to creatively consider how we might imagine new and communal approaches to graduation. The curation of the show, led by Imani Robinson and Rabz Lansiquot, was:

grounded in conversations with the artists on the realities of their work and practice, looking also at how they wanted to continue to grow. Instead of concerns about hyper-visibility and competition that you might usually associate with graduation, the central question in the space was actually, how did you survive? (Clarke-Brown, 2018)

Adopting the curatorial approach of working with each artist in a space as opposed to appealing for requests prior to an exhibition enables an artist to feel the absence of an existing hierarchy between them and a curator, while offering the potential of collaboration, as opposed

to a compromise. The aims and results of the show were multi-faceted and, while some feel it drew attention to and subverted the normative, systematic behaviours of the academy, Imani suggests “this is not an answer to the violences of institutions but an entry point into building communities that can nurture and support each other ... you don't need to graduate alone” (Clarke-Brown, 2018).

Set in a historical building complex, Copeland Gallery offers a large semi-industrial, white-walled, exhibition space. The alternative graduation show featured a diverse body of work, varied in both subject and medium. Some of the works displayed were given their own space in the gallery, while others shared an area. However, each work was allocated enough room so as not to encroach upon the reading of the accompanying piece. Artist and curator Tamar Clarke-Brown reviewed the show for *i-D*. Clarke-Brown’s appraisal of the multitude of works poignantly demonstrates the diversity of topics ensuing from the featured artists’ varied sociocultural backgrounds.

Clarke-Brown reflects:

There was the mumbled Mancunian phonetics of Sade Mica’s *Solo Disco*, and the fluid blue quilted expanses and inviting indigo hues of figurative painter Sala Olulode’s mixed-media works. Titles like *All Night Dancing With You* and *Gwara Gwara, Death Drop*, signalled a dedication to dance, to nighttime connections, to queer layered identities, and to blue as a holding space for it all when nothing else could. In another room, Shadi Al-Atallah’s striking mixed media series showed a contorted black subject, jostling with the overlaid concerns of mental health, well-being and the struggles of visibility, working it out through passed-down practices like traditional Saudi medicine and the jinn conjuring dance. Irvine Bartlett’s photography series *Kumbi (Reclaiming*

Utopia) stretched out across the walls, with half-shadowy figures apparently unconcerned with the laws of exposure, or with coming into view at all. Christopher Kirubi's work, *each other (row of trees)*, shared a similar tone. A lightly-printed newspaper on a wooden shelf next to a phrase on the wall that read 'Unimaginable and unseen we don't have to be seen in order to be'. The statement is rendered partly in pencil and partly in neon pink gloss paint. (Clarke-Brown, 2018)

Additionally featured in the exhibition was the photography series *The Beachy Head Women* by Rebekah Williams. Her large-scale colour photographs of nude Black women on a rocky beach were a stark contrast to the hyper-sexualized imagery of Black women in popular culture. While the women were nude and indeed beautiful, sex was not the tone of the work; the images, to my mind, commented on the body's relation to itself and its surroundings. I read there to be a celebration of unbounded female sexuality within the images, suggested by the endless expanses of skin, cliffs, pebbles and blue sky.

2019 saw BBZ and SYFU adopt a new approach: applications were additionally open to queer Black artists who had not attended or graduated from an art institution. Widening the scope of eligibility acknowledges those who haven't had access to university education but have experienced the exclusions that permeate arts communities and galleries. Further, it allows for connections to be made between those within the academy and those outside. A particularly notable concept BBZ articulate in their 2019 interview in *Dazed* is stated in their criteria: "there are no constraints on the requirements of the display of blackness, or explicitly performance or presentation of identities, like there are in so many institutions" (Jamal, 2019). In

Disidentifications, Muñoz aptly explores the particular expectation placed upon queer racialized

artists. When appraising the contributions gay Latinx arts activist Felix Gonzalez-Torres made to the world, Muñoz (1999) writes:

Gonzalez-Torres foregrounded the complexity of contemporary hybrid identities. Given his Latino ethnicity, a sector of the arts community expected his work to be influenced and shaped by a strong identification with Latin American masters. Identifications with a very queer Anglo-American modernist, the father of psychoanalysis, or a high French theorist of the spectacle are not, according to critics ... proper identifications for the artist. (p. 166)

The static and predefined spaces the art world designates for such artists were continually challenged by Gonzalez-Torres. Muñoz goes on to assert that, “these identity constructs are more often than not exotic rituals and performances commissioned by mainstream culture” (Muñoz, 1999, p.166). Muñoz offers that “these accounts of mainstream identity are, in most instances unable to account for the specificity of Black and queer lives or any other collisions of two or more minority designations” (Muñoz, 1999, p.166). To my mind, Muñoz’s observation speaks to the importance of the alternative graduation certainly embracing works that directly explore Black and queer Black expression, oppression, and lived experience, but these markers not being a stipulation. Responding to an interview in which Gonzalez-Torres was labelled apolitical, Muñoz acknowledges this as a “charge levelled at many minority cultural producers who do not critique the dominant culture through predictable routes” (Muñoz, 1990, p. 166). This understanding can arguably help cultural producers prepare for adverse media reception while internally meditating on the merits of confronting audiences and critics with “the unexpected” and unpredictable.

Sorryyoufeeluncomfortable utilize the artist platform Cargo Collective to host their website. The site is minimalist in aesthetic; the simple black text on a white background is professional and connotes the gallery space. Their home page bears a short but impactful statement:

***sorryyoufeeluncomfortable* is a London-based collective creating intentional spaces for radical study, conversation and multi-disciplinary art-making.**²⁰

Formed out of the Baldwin's Nigger Reloaded Project, initiated by artist Barby Asante and curator Teresa Cisneros, SYFU has presented work at ICA, 198 CAL, Wellcome Collection, Tate Exchange, The Showroom and Iniva in London, as well as Many Studios (Glasgow), BALTIC (Newcastle), KVS (Brussels), Nottingham Contemporary (Nottingham) and Framer Framed (Amsterdam). (Sorryyoufeeluncomfortable, n.d.).

This is followed by their Facebook and email contact. A tension, almost a disruption, is suggested by their initial description of who they are followed by the mention of James Baldwin sharply contrasted against a list of “high art” institutions. However, the mention of Iniva, (the Institute of International Visual Art) alludes to the intent of SYFU. Radical arts organization Iniva run a programme in which they collaborate with British-based, British-born artists, curators and cultural producers of African and Asian descent. They also house the Stuart Hall Library. The collective is comprised of six individuals: Ewuraba (Rabz) Hama-Lansiquot, Imani Robinson, Jacob V Joyce, Zviki Mutyambizi, Eva Cookney and Laurel Hadleigh. While differing in medium, a political thread ties the artists’ profiles together. Artist, writer and designer

²⁰ These two lines of the collective's artist statement appear in bold on SYFU's website, and thus, I have reflected the original formatting here.

Cookney suggests she is “most interested in discussion and conversation and how to involve an audience in political thought.” Filmmaker, programmer, and DJ Lansiquot states her work “is informed by Black liberatory thought, Black queer studies, and lived experience, seeking to highlight the nuances of marginalised experience, and move beyond representation, to liberation.” Artist Mutyambizi delineates her diasporic experience of living in Harare and London, giving consideration to how we map the changes we undergo when we relocate. Hadleigh works predominantly with documentary-based film. An artist and writer, she is interested in what lies between journalist and storyteller, investigating the contrast between media portrayals and representation and the accounts of those being represented. Robson describes herself as “a London born diaspora child of British, Caribbean and African-American descent. She is a writer and curator and is currently developing an artistic practice working with prose, poetry and performance.” Member Jacob V Joyce articulates:

Over the last three years, organising performances, exhibitions, dinners and parades, the struggle against oppression has become a recurrent pattern in my work. Acts of protest within my artistic practice interrogate the structures of white supremacy, colonial histories, and patriarchic heteronormativity that inform capitalism. I draw strength and inspiration from African theology working along side devotees and priests of Lucumi and Yoruba. I aim to create crossroads where activism, arts and marginalised narratives intersect. Sculpture, performance and curation are all tools I use to construct objects and platforms of critical contemplation. (Sorryyoufeeluncomfortable, n.d.)

I have elected to convey Joyce’s statement in its entirety for I feel it aptly articulates the importance and possibilities of theory interacting with arts-based activism. Dinners and parades, each a communal happening, each with political and cultural connotations, are given the same

weight as overt acts of protest and the reading of African theology. Regarding the intersection of art, activism and scholarship, Suzanne Van Rossenberg draws from sociologist Patricia Leavy to advocate for the importance of a transdisciplinary approach when considering how we might combat oppressive real-world conditions. Leavy argues, “as many of the big problems that we face today are not created within the boundaries of one discipline, disciplines need to be transgressed to facilitate working solutions” (as cited in Rossenberg, 2017, p.25). Rossenberg adds that, “Potentially, researchers who stay within their disciplines cannot provide useful recommendations for social change” (2017, p. 25).

When analyzing the beneficial impacts the approach of combining practice, research and activism can offer art institutions, Rossenberg further suggests:

The idea of the proposed transdisciplinarity is to trouble *that* context which keeps audiences’ understanding of ‘art’ quite conventional and static. Paying attention to the full context of art-activist practice, as well as their actual social impact, can inform a new step in restructuring art canons and ‘reading against the grain.’ (2017, p. 40)

A significant amount of research, practice and in some circumstances, activism are part of capitalist neoliberal economies that produce social inequalities through their structures. Rossenberg suggests the use of combinations of research, practice, and activism is needed for overcoming the hegemonic structures that create obstacles for marginalized people. Maintaining a critical approach, she identifies the lack of evaluative measures arts and arts-activist practitioners employ, offering the skills academics utilize as a potential remedy to this.

SYFU display their Twitter feed on their site and, at the time of my visit, a post by sociologist and specialist in women’s activism in Europe, Akwugo Emejulu, reads:

Today in Feminist Pedagogy/Feminist Activism I'm delighted to welcome Imani Robinson as a guest lecturer who will be discussing her Black feminist artistic practice. At the moment, students are listening to Archie Shepp and doing stream of consciousness writing. (Akwugo Emejulu, 2019)

Diasporic existence is a thread running through each practice held by the members of SYFU. The multitude of locations the collective draw from—both geographically and theoretically—speaks to the complex experience of being Black in Britain; however, their desire to explore diasporic topics displays a commitment to resisting the nationalist project of assimilation. The collective arguably employ the method of transdisciplinarity; this is evidenced in the melding of theory, cultural studies, and historical and present-day activism, all aligning with a variety of art mediums. Situating their work across a variety of locations, SYFU ensure their knowledge and insights are accessed by a variety of audiences, not limited to the visitors of galleries.

In contrast to the fine art aesthetics of SYFU, BBZ utilize mainstream platforms and media outlets to heighten awareness of the concerns they explore and to showcase their activism, which exists in a multitude of forms. This functions as a callout for those seeking community to be aware of BBZ and feel able to attend their events. An initial Google search presents interviews with popular online magazines *Dazed*, *i.D*, European music and culture magazine *Crack*, and global Black cultural platform *Afropunk*.

Initially a duo comprised of filmmaker Nadine Davis and photographer Tia Simon-Campbell, BBZ hosted their first house party and exhibition in 2016 with the aim of offering queer women and female-identifying people of colour an alternative space where they would be centred. The duo has since expanded into a larger collective hosting an array of club nights,

exhibitions and installations, gaining access to “big name” galleries such as the Tate and the Victoria and Albert Museum. The politics of representation are generally agreed to be a small part of a wider project, with some in the academy suggesting representation as an aim to be futile. I argue the former, that visibility has a role in countering erasure and empowering minorities while also reframing the popular narratives constructed by colonial discourse. Of course, representation is plagued by tokenism and current trends. When *Crack* posed this problem to BBZ, highlighting the current phenomenon of “diversity” and queer acting as buzzwords across a variety of media and institutions, Campbell responded that, “visibility is everything ... it means that people are able to see themselves in a space where they would never normally see themselves, in spaces that they’ve usually been alienated [from]”(Haidari, 2017). Davis adds, “for my trans friends, my differently-abled friends, my female-identifying friends, I feel there’s more room to take up and more confidence in taking up that space. I definitely feel nights like BBZ have helped steer the conversation” (Haidari, 2017).

Visibility and representation have an arguably heightened significance for Black-British and queer Black-British folk who at once don’t fit into the British imaginary and often don’t fulfil expectations from “home.” Home for some may be Britain but the provocateur disrupts this notion with the question “where are you really from?” Nodding toward this diasporic experience, BBZ articulate:

When you’re an immigrant you end up creating your own home, and you create home within community, and we’re exploring that idea. When we go ‘back home,’ i.e. to the Caribbean or Africa, we don’t quite fit in, and also when we’re in the UK we don’t fit in. It’s important to recognise that Black British people have created their own culture.
(Haidari, 2017)

In 2017, BBZ took over the Tate for four days under the title *Gal-Dem*. The title, a Jamaican patois colloquialism, speaks to the very particular existence of a queer Black-British identity. Most non-Jamaicans in the UK know the term from popular Dancehall musician Beenie Man's 2000 hit "Girls Dem Sugar" (A patois heterosexual expression denoting a "ladies' man"). The claiming of this term by racialized women linguistically subverts patriarchal ideals. 2015 saw radical British print and online magazine *Gal-Dem*, a political publication run by and for racialized women and non-binary folk, start up. The use of the term speaks to our relation to men, "white Britain," and binary LGBT scenes that partake in constructing homo-imperialist narratives, casting countries such as Jamaica as the homophobic death capital of the world while simultaneously envying, appropriating, and consuming various aspects of our culture.

When looking at representation and the use of arts-activism by Black queers, Rinaldo Walcott adapts Caribbean philosopher Edouard Glissant's (1989) notion of poetics to explore "homopoetics." Homopoetics is used as a lens through which to view the interaction between Black queer communities' relation to other queers "all the while producing modes of being that are both in concert with and against hegemonic gay and lesbian identities, homonormative inclusion, and Black homophobia" (Walcott, 2013, p. 147). Walcott further contends, "it is part my argument that Black queer image-making contributes significantly to homopoetic relations and identifications across the diaspora" (2013, p. 147). Walcott argues that photographic and filmic modes of production call for a new ethical relation to living, shaping homopoethics, "where death is also an essential element of embodiment and subjectivity" (2013, p. 151). Drawing from Black critical theorist David Marriott, Walcott explores the problematics of the brutal photography depicting the lynched body, resulting in an archive of lost agency, brutality and powerlessness. As Walcott makes enquiry into audience positionality and what we are called

into action to alter/reconsider/reconstitute in our own lives, he contends that queer Black artists, are reshaping the “Black image.” He suggests queer Black artists, through their praxis, are superseding the act of witnessing, to instead call into question a poetics of relation which holds Black living and death as a constitutive element. Walcott addresses the weight the politics of representation continues to hold and the interruption we make when we create our own avenues of visibility.

A visibly notable aspect of BBZ is their willingness and aptitude for collaboration, speaking to the coalitional politics integral to earlier activist movements. They have collaborated with an array of artists and producers, diversifying the events they’re able to host and be a part of. This way of working, I argue, offers the potential to lift the many, not the few, and to this they offer that: “everything starts with the community. Without the community we are nothing. It’s all about building together, so that we’re all stronger and elevate together” (Haidari, 2017).

SYFU and BBZ are two collectives that are able to bring unique and distinctive ideas and qualities to the planning and hosting of the alternative graduation. Both clearly demonstrate a commitment to furthering the cause of QPOC in Britain and to writing our understandings into the British imaginary and archive. They are simultaneously providing QPOC with alternative spaces and thus extracting us from the compromises and erasures inherent in functioning in spaces that were never designed with us as the focal point. SYFU hold a deep working knowledge of the academy and art institutions which is invaluable for QPOC arts-activists wanting to branch out in Britain. When meditating on the appropriating and de-valuing, by white males, of my queer cultural heritage experienced during my time as an art student, the community these collectives are providing, along with a safe space, yet a space just as successful as the former, are two factors I would have benefitted from. An opportunity to work through the

experience, the alternative graduation offers graduates the chance to refute the neo-liberal individualist position. Instead, the chance is offered to graduate as a community, and potentially, as a collective that can redistribute their acquired knowledge and provide others with the chance to engage in a similar experience. Surely this way of graduating additionally better equips QPOC to think collectively, elevating each other as opposed to merely meeting our own gains.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The need for racialized people to enact a radical politics that centres their needs while highlighting their achievements, unique contributions, and presence in Britain remains strong. Unearthing formerly hidden and unconsidered histories, including the geographies of people of colour in the UK, remains an on-going project. Black and other racialized historians such as Eddy Chambers focus on important histories that do not focus on queer people's place within the narratives of early or later migration into Britain. White theatre and performance academics such as Stephen Greer focus on histories of queer British arts-activism that do not take race as an additional element requiring further insight. Thus, it is up to those of who straddle such hyphenated identities to ensure our histories are properly recorded and available to those outside of our immediate communities.

Through looking at direct examples of arts-based activism, each of which build communities while utilizing the erasure of QPOC from imaginings of Britain as material to create platforms, works and projects, I have delineated the agency that is present in the process and materialization of the arts-based activism I have explored throughout this thesis. I have shown how "queer histories" have been recorded to exclude QPOC from our understandings of queer space, such as the history of Canal Street. In response to these historical exclusions, I've demonstrated how QPOC activist collectives, such as Rainbow Noir, are actively protesting and contesting such narratives through the use of arts-based activism, reshaping our notions of queer space and, indeed, of British cities.

The hyphenated identities QPOC embody, referenced at various points throughout this thesis, are reflected in the need to employ such a vast range of scholarship, always reaching outside of any one discipline when appraising QPOC's position in space, be it in the academy or

in European cities more broadly. Such identities explicate the importance of giving the same weight to diasporic, ancestral connections as one gives to QPOC's relationship to Britain and being "British." I have demonstrated how arts-based activism can successfully be used as a vehicle to communicate to and involve those outside of the academy while employing the significant knowledge production that occurs in academic spaces. The performance stages created by such platforms as the Cocoa Butter Club are offering up the chance to employ cultural articulations that can work with and against queer performative expression while offering performers recognition, career progression, and the chance to build one's practice in a supportive environment.

As queer identities continue to find new language and our understandings of—at times—conflicting needs continue to manifest, the challenge not to fall prey to the exclusions identity politics often procure is likely only to build. Thus, I argue, we must take the reflexive position of listening to, rather than silencing, those in our communities who do not necessarily share our viewpoint. Silencing them would be akin to performing the same strategies executed by dominant powers who seek to suppress, silence, and erase the voices and presence of QPOC. In taking this reflexive stance and accepting heterogeneity, we can refuse the distraction of fighting against and damaging each other, damaging people who have often faced extreme violences inflicted by the same power structures that have been the source of our own pain. The collective ways of working and spaces created by the individuals and groups examined in this thesis offer a way for this to manifest; further, they demonstrate that collaborating, as opposed to infighting, is, indeed, possible. However, this collaborative way of working also relies on each of us to recognize when we ourselves are performing silencing and exclusionary tactics.

The fluidity of arts-based activism continues to be a core strength and reason I believe in its ability to be an effective tool in fighting historic and present-day oppressions that disproportionately affect POC and QPOC residing in Britain, oppressions that are often nonlinear and find new articulations. After appraising and exploring the various formulations arts-based activism is taking on in the United Kingdom, this thesis concludes with arguing for the continued use of arts-based activism as both a strategy and tool to fight oppression, erasure, inequalities, and importantly, to build queer racialized communities.

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