Given how varied queer people of color are in their histories, cultures, and strategies for expression and survival in the Americas, it is impossible to fully take account of us in one chapter. This essay is an abbreviated account of the field that has come to be known as “queer of color critique” over the past thirty years, focusing on a few keywords and themes. In what follows, I narrate some of the overlapping histories of queer communities of color as they resonate and reverberate across the shared trajectories and cultural productions that emerged from modernity, modern and neoliberal capitalism, the evolution of race and racism, and the colonial and neocolonial encounters and diasporas of the past 500-odd years.

Although the phrase “queer of color critique” only came into usage recently, we can trace the origins of the collusion between constructions of race and sexuality in the Americas to the particular expression of sexual violence, Christian and colonial militarism, and homophobic racism that came into existence during and that has survived since the colonial encounters between Europeans, Africans, and indigenous peoples. As scholars of settler colonialist discourse have shown, violence toward and a fear of non-heteronormative sexualities (as defined by Euro-American Christianity) were firmly in place during the first centuries of the colonial encounter – particularly in the violence toward indigenous peoples who showed what was, for Europeans, nonnormative gender and sexual expression, including what we might now recognize as same-sex oriented, inter- or transgendered ways of living.

This violence took place across the Americas, as Spanish, English, and French colonial forces sought to destroy the nations and cultures that were already in place by using geopolitical disruption (forced migration and the displacement of native peoples from their sovereign lands), the breaking up of family networks (native boarding schools and the sexualized and cultural...
violence that took place there), disciplinary regimes (the Inquisition and other colonial bodies that criminalized gender nonnormativity, sodomy, and forms of same-sex desire), and bald, naked violence (for instance, Balboa’s setting of dogs upon indigenous peoples in what is now Peru for their “sins” of sexual transgression and dressing as women). All of these actions laid the groundwork for a logic that framed indigenous peoples as feminized or animalistic, thereby installing European colonialism as patriarchal and heteronormative and, above all, claiming the modern category of “human” for European whites only.

Thus, as the foundational racial violences that underlie the modern nation-states that now comprise these continents were being laid down and concretized, categories of normative and nonnormative sexuality were constructed alongside and over them. Obviously these were not limited to indigenous peoples, given that similar forms of racialized aggression took place as part of the logic of chattel slavery and also recurred as sex panics attached to later waves of immigration. Chattel slavery, for instance, sanctioned and even built into its own economic project sexual violences against African men, women, and children, who were at times categorized as breedable stock and therefore as nonhuman inventory holding a great deal of economic investment. Having been denied citizenship and therefore legibility as subjects who deserved protection under the law, slaves were seen as lacking the right to consent and control over their persons: to be a slave – male or female, adult or child – was to be available to white rape, and yet also to have that selfsame act denied as rape. To be black then was to be always already sexualized as against white citizens and therefore to be always and already deviant. Throughout U.S. history, we can see similar legal, juridical, and disciplinary violence deployed against other racialized groups: in the immigration laws that restricted Asian women’s immigration to the United States and created bachelor societies of Asian American men as a cheap labor force, while also publicly deriding Asian men as both feminized and sexually dangerous, for instance.

Queer of color critique articulates queer theory from the heart of these and other histories, although at times it also intervenes in and complicates mainstream and Euro-American queer theory. For instance, by claiming the oceanic traumas and sensations of the middle passage – the time and space of the slave ship’s voyage from Africa to the Americas – as a site from which to theorize black queerness, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley notes that “fluidity” has been a central symbol of queer theory for the past fifteen years: “[Q]ueer theory has harnessed the repetitive, unpredictable energy of currents, waves, and foam to smash and wash into bits many I’s from the gendered self to the sexed body, from heterocentric feminist speech to
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homonormative gay discourse.” Tinsley’s rethinking of fluidity as a trope of queer theory demands that it be reworked from the point of view of its unexamined debt to the black Atlantic: “To become an expansively decolonizing practice, queer theory must adjust its vision to see what has been submerged in the process of unmarking whiteness and global northernness. ... In the black queer time and place of the door of no return, fluid desire is neither purely metaphor nor purely luxury.”

Tinsley’s important intervention places hemispheric African diasporic history at the productive heart of a decolonizing queer theory/practice. Grounding her argument in readings of the Caribbean writers Eliot Bliss, Dionne Brand, Mayotte Capecia, Michelle Cliff, and Ida Faubert, she argues that alongside these terrible – terror-filled and terrorizing – experiences of violence, forms of cultural, familial, and emotional expression emerged and survived, which testifies not only to the determined refusal of these many peoples to disappear but also to their ongoing political objections to the systems under which they labored. (And here we might also think of the more experimental work of Claude McKay, especially the 1929 novel *Banjo*, in which he celebrates and examines the migratory lives of African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American workers, folding diasporic homosociality into a radical critique of capital). Recent work on *mati* women in Suriname, for instance – working-class women whose sexual and emotional practices refuse easy distinctions between heterosexual and lesbian life but many of whose primary relationships are formed with women – hypothesizes that although the term “*mati*” means “same-sex lover,” it likely emerged etymologically from the term “shipmate,” as in “s/he who survived the middle passage with me.” The discursive and material violence attached to the production of erotic categories of normative and nonnormative being is real, of course, but what is also clear is that the queerness, as it were, of peoples of color emerges from the fire of modernity’s historical forges and has an energy to survive and create that is fiercely its own. One might also consider the separation of theory from literature to be another form of discursive violence, one that is linked to hierarchies of normativity. As feminist literary critics have shown, and as the important literary contributions of women of color feminism have demonstrated, one is hard pressed to separate queer of color theory from queer of color cultural production in terms of fiction, poetry, dance, film and other forms of creativity.

Indeed, as the warrior-like term “fierce” testifies, the aesthetics of queer of color life are tied to the daily work of creating and thriving in a phobic world, to the beauty, courage, and humor that emerge out of and as psychic and physical survival at the individual, familial, and community levels. Struggle and liberation are key terms here, and thus the history and cultural
production attached to global liberation struggles must be understood as historical antecedents to the lives and cultural production of queers of color in the Americas. These include but are not limited to: indigenous resistance movements; Third World nationalist and postcolonial struggles; trade unionist and socialist movements and the Marxist intellectual traditions attached to them; first-, second-, and third-wave feminism, in particular the enormous and important body of writing that emerged from the cultural and political arms of women of color feminism; the Chicana/Chicano movements, or El Movimiento; transnational and pan-African black radicalism; transgender rights movements; disability rights movements; the civil rights and Black Power movements; and, finally, the modern gay and lesbian rights movement.

All of these histories undergird and feed the logic, literature, and body of thought that has come to be known as queer of color critique, and they are expressed in theater, poetry, political manifestos, novels, anthologies, dance, performance, and also at the everyday level of the gesture – the snap, the twist, the turn, the strut, the jack, the twerk, the twirl of the fancy dance, the lift of a skirt, the one-two step of the merengue, the switch of a hip and the cock of an eyebrow, the twitch of the lip, and the languid wave – that forms the world-making strategies of people of color in the Americas. To engage with queer of color life in the Americas is to be humbled and dazzled by its richness and its courage; to be fully present to it is to be moved affectively and politically by what might be yet unleashed if we move closer to its utopic possibilities.

In ranging from political thought to art to daily life, queer of color writing and cultural expression can hardly be captured in this one essay. The next three sections each attempt to take account of a few overlapping terms by way of an initial gesture. The first section takes account of the complicated role that the nation state has played in queer of color life; the second looks at the interlinked notions of exile, diaspora, and movement as they have been claimed by queer of color writing; and the third takes up performance, aesthetics, and erotics.

**State, Nation, and Violence**

In her 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes her identity as a queer Chicana beyond the geographical boundaries of the nation-state: “As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover.” Using the cultures that exist along and upon the U.S.-Mexican...
border (cultures that predate the establishment of that border in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) as a model from which to theorize mixed-race consciousness, or mestizaje, alongside her queerness, Anzaldúa sees lesbian identity as a universal quality that exceeds the limits of the nation-state. In this view, queerness and her mestiza consciousness refute any sense of belonging to one bordered nation. Instead, she occupies a space outside the nation-state, making mestiza consciousness an identity that takes up the exclusion of queers and border citizens from the state as a place from which to theorize non-binaristic and alternative forms of belonging.

And yet, despite Anzaldúa’s utopic vision – in the sense that José Esteban Muñoz defined utopia, via Ernst Bloch, as “relational to historically situated struggles ... the hopes of a collective” but also as a kind of queer futurity, as the not-yet arrived – for most people, the state proves to be something far more intractable at the present time. Extending the work of feminist critics of liberalism and neoliberalism in particular, Roderick A. Ferguson has argued that the state, the nation, and citizenship itself are always articulated as universals that are normatively heterosexual and white, both producing and obscuring populations of color as always and already non-heteronormative and sexually deviant. As Ferguson argues, the nation-state has historically solicited (and forced) the labor of non-white populations by offering the promise of limited forms of citizenship – which is understood here as both legal and social membership in the nation-state – while simultaneously policing those same populations along the lines of sexual propriety and social hygiene. Drawing from the archive of black feminist and lesbian literary criticism and African American literature, for instance, Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Ferguson argues that it is precisely from the point of view of these “surplus populations” that we might begin to produce a critique of capitalism, and therefore of the nation-state: “[W]e must see the gendered and eroticized elements of racial formations as offering ruptural – i.e., critical – possibilities.” Culture, he argues, is one place where those critical possibilities are deployed: “U.S. women of color feminism helped to designate the imagination as a social practice under contemporary globalization.”

Given the foundational violence against queer people of color as both sexual and racialized subjects that underlies the formation of state citizenship as always and already white and heterosexual, it is no surprise that the nation-state emerges as more of a problem than as a site for solutions in queer of color critique, and indeed, recent queer of color and feminist critique has begun to critique a “rights-based” – that is, “state-based” – approach
to social change. This coming-together of women of color feminism, queer theory, and critical race theory has also drawn energy from and contributed to disability and transgender thought, in particular the work of Dean Spade, whose writing on the law in relation to transgender activism has fundamentally reshaped strategies for queer of color activism by questioning recognition, inclusion, and incorporation projects and instead focusing on the strategic alliances that have been formed in relation to the administrative violence of judicial-industrial complexes.\textsuperscript{17}

In examining the relationships between queers of color and the nation-state, queer of color theorists have described the strategies queers employ to survive within, dismantle, and/or (dis)identify with the nation-state, developing trenchant critiques of the strategies the state uses to mobilize gay and lesbian rights for nationalist ends as well as, in turn, critiquing the strategies that mainstream gay and lesbian organizations have deployed to engage the state as a site from which to leverage limited and problematic forms of political power, including, for instance, marriage rights and the right to serve in the military. These relationships reveal dialectical tensions between national belonging and exclusion, and between complicity in and subjection to state violence and neglect.

In the years since 9/11 and the restructuring of the modern U.S. war machine during George W. Bush’s presidency, the paradoxical relationship between queer belonging and queer abjection has been respatialized along transnational lines. Taking into account the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the deployment of anti-Muslim sentiment along the ideological tracks laid down by orientalism, queer of color theorists have turned their attention to the relationship between the rights-oriented discourse of equality and protection within the modern nation-state, on the one hand, and the logics with which the state justifies its exercise of violence against foreign countries and their peoples, on the other hand. In the period following 9/11, as Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai have written, “the construct of the terrorist relies on a knowledge of sexual perversity (failed heterosexuality, Western notions of the psyche, and a certain queer monstrosity).”\textsuperscript{18} That is to say, the perverse and socially dangerous qualities that defined queerness in the period leading up to 9/11 were, after that national trauma, displaced onto the Arab (and, as Puar shows, the South Asian) subject. As Puar argues, this displacement has occasioned the eruption of a new mainstream gay and lesbian politics that she terms “homonationalism,” in which gay and lesbian organizations increasingly advocate for the right to gain normative forms of citizenship and national belonging, including the right to marry and the right to serve in the military.\textsuperscript{19}
Within this logic, gay and lesbian rights become part and parcel of the new militarized normal, which is then deployed against people of color and racialized others overseas (and, of course, domestically, where poor people of color continue to disproportionately join the military). It is exactly at this political intersection that we must ask: What is the price of normative belonging to the nation-state? This deep investment in conservative forms of citizenship has produced a reformist logic – one that Chandan Reddy finds articulated in Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* (1928) – in which “the liberal state embodies and figures the ethical fulcrum without which the movements and claims for equality would be both ineffective and dead.”

As the debates around and responses to California’s Proposition 8 – a 2008 ballot initiative banning gay and lesbian marriage that was passed by voters – demonstrated, these new political formations have resulted in the further exclusion of people of color from gay and lesbian politics. In one stunning example of the tone-deafness around race in the mainstream gay and lesbian rights movement, in the days leading up to the vote, anti–Proposition 8 interest groups ran an advertisement urging voters to consider gay and lesbian marriage as analogous to interracial marriage, arguing that the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* case, in which an interracial heterosexual couple appealed to the Supreme Court for the right to marry, and which ultimately struck down all laws banning interracial marriage, was but a precedent to the current marriage rights debate. This strategy, however, did not only ignore the historic hostility toward interracial marriage in black communities, thus striking a discordant and condescending note at a pressing political moment. It also presaged the later backlash against communities of color on the part of gay and lesbian organizations who blamed the passage of Proposition 8 on those communities, publicly deploying the unfair and historically ungrounded idea that communities of color are more homophobic than white communities are.

Exacerbating this grievous political algebra, *The Advocate* then ran a cover story on December 16, 2008, with the title “Gay Is the New Black,” a statement that both occluded the ongoing struggle for political and economic equity for African American communities and emptied out the history of that struggle in order to make blackness a signifier of revolutionary and thereby commodifiable chic. Of course, as it turned out, it was in fact the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (itself an organization that has been historically targeted for its nonnormative and yet hyper-heterosexual family organization) that was later revealed to be financially instrumental in pushing Proposition 8 and in targeting communities and voters of color, in a logic that echoed the later complaints of pro-gay marriage groups.
The state, as juridical structure, and the nation, as an ideological concept and discursive force that structures ideas of who belongs and who does not belong within its borders, thus continue to impact and shape the everyday lives of the nation-state’s queer citizens as well as the lives of the queer non-citizens – migrant workers and undocumented peoples, for instance – who reside there. When “multiplied,” as Ferguson terms it, as and with race, we also begin to see that queers – in particular, those queers of color living in poverty – are disproportionately targeted by state violence, as well: as, for instance, in the case of transgendered sex workers who experience either police aggression or police indifference to the many forms of violence visited upon them. This violence lies atop a particularly modern paradox of the U.S. nation-state, which rests its claims to liberal democracy upon a mythology of equal rights and protections under the law for all of its citizens and inhabitants and yet, as critics of liberalism have shown, in fact produces everyday ideologies by which many of those citizens and inhabitants, by dint of racial and sexual difference or economic inequality, are excluded.

Returning to Anzaldúa’s vision of the stateless queer, we might also think about the occlusion of indigenous peoples from her analysis, which posits a borderland, or transnational identity, but in doing so, and particularly in doing so via a mixed-race model of mestizaje, in essence renders invisible the existence of sovereign nations internal to the nation-state itself. The realities of reservation as well as urban Native American life – even the fundamental fact that from within an indigenous epistemology, the U.S. nation-state (the source to which we turn for rights-based claims) lies atop many sovereign indigenous nations that continue to resist settler colonialism – attest to the fact that we cannot take on an unnuanced relationship to the nation and state, as either the source, or even a resource, for our larger dreams of social and political change.  

Home, Belonging, and Movement

In a seminal sequence in the now classic 1991 film Paris Is Burning, Dorian Corey explains what a “house” is:

A house – they’re families for a lot of children who don’t have families. But this is a new meaning of family. The hippies had families. And no one thought nothing about it. It wasn’t a question of a man and a woman and children which we grew up knowing as family – it’s a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond.  

The question of belonging and the normative function of the home – particularly as families of origin – as well as the rethinking of the very nature
of house and home are at the heart of queer critique, if only because so many queers experience the family as a site of violence and rejection – one is reminded here of Audre Lorde’s vexed relationship with her mother in Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography (1982), or the protagonist’s struggles with his preacher father in Go Tell It on the Mountain. This should come as no surprise given the central place of the family as a cornerstone of heterosexual and patriarchal structures; and yet even in a period in which gays and lesbians have begun to win limited (and, as discussed in the previous section, contested) civil rights victories in the courts and in Congress, in fiction, film, and queer of color politics, the trope of the queer as exile or refugee from the family continues, whether in the mythology of gay migration from small town or rural areas to urban areas or in the hard material realities of transgendered and queer kids who escape from their homes into the precarity of street life, as do the “children” of the voguing houses. And yet, as the exiled protagonist of Monique Truong’s The Book of Salt (2004) reminds us, the very primal wound of familial and parental rejection remains behind as a longing for home.

In short, mobility, movement, and the vexed issues of having a home or belonging continue to linger in queer of color writing, performance, and theory, just as indeed they do in queer life and cultural production more broadly. These themes take many forms. For instance, the turn to the study of transnational queer literary cultures, as discussed at length by Martin Joseph Ponce in Chapter 14, has opened up the idea that movement, migration, and immigration across national and hemispheric lines are central and important experiences that are occluded when we imagine “gay community” to be largely static or nationally bounded. As artists and scholars have shown, queer transnational migration takes a variety of forms, as do the various queer diasporas that have shaped queer of color critique. Whether by forced migration, displacement, refugee movement, choice, or removal, non-white peoples have come to the Americas and have moved within the Americas in a variety of different trajectories, some of which are linear – for instance, immigration to and settlement within the United States – and some of which are not – for example, moving to the United States and returning regularly to, or splitting time between, the United States and a country of origin.

Displacing the nation-state as a central and normalizing analytic lens through which we view queer life throws the close ties between nationalism and heteropatriarchy into stark relief. David L. Eng’s work on the intersections between queerness and diasporic life, for instance, argues that the similar tropes of migration from home – of movement away from
origins – and static or traditional notions of home and family as they unfold in diasporic movement and in the anti-normative possibilities of queerness might make happy bedfellows of the two. Taking up R. Zamora Linmark’s 1995 Rolling the R’s, a novella that tells the story of a group of queer and straight pan-Asian and Pacific immigrant teenagers in Honolulu, he writes that “rather than demanding the abnegation of homeland … into standard narratives of immigration, assimilation and settlement, the queer diaspora … emphatically substitutes a queer affiliation that preserves individual histories of development … [predicated] on the engagement of racial, gender, class and national differentials for its social efficacy and engagement. … This is what a diaspora organized around queerness potentially offers.”

Similarly, in her work on cultural production in the South Asian diaspora, Gayatri Gopinath argues that “a queer diasporic framework productively exploits the analogous relation between nation and diaspora on the one hand, and between heterosexuality and queerness on the other. … Queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation.”

A queer diasporic imaginary then offers a site from which to rethink the romance of filial belonging that has undergirded certain conservative forms of liberal citizenship, but it has also produced imaginative forms of transnational belonging that weave together multiple cultural trajectories and produce new forms of affiliation and creativity. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes’s work on Puerto Rican artists in the Bronx borough of New York City, for instance, documents how the performance work of Arthur Avila and Elizabeth Marrero makes “Nuyorico” a site of queer utopian possibility in which “neighborhood-based transgressive performance and local interventions offer new social visions and spaces for Puerto Ricans and other queer people of color … a concept that riffs off the tradition of Nuyorican cultural resistance that has been a hallmark of diasporic Puerto Rican life.”

This sense of being “between and afar” also finds expression in Rinaldo Walcott’s theorizing of a “homopoetics” of queer Caribbean life in diaspora that occupies a place of privilege – of being a queer migrant whose very queerness is both grounded in its roots and enabled by its absence from a “home” that criminalizes queer life and sex. Placing himself in conversation with Edouard Glissant, Hilton Als, Audre Lorde, and M. Jacqui Alexander, Walcott argues that “the work of diaspora and or Caribbean extensions outside the archipelago and the ethics of speaking from ‘away’ can draw on the poetics of the region to speak back in ways that ethically inform a politics of the possible there and here.”

This sense that movement, migration, and displacement offer valuable metaphors and material histories through which to rethink queerness has
found expression in a queer of color theory that also seeks to upend and reconsider how subjectivity itself is formed. Sara Ahmed’s work on affect and orientation finds its roots in the school of Western philosophy called phenomenology, but it is also grounded in her experiences of migration. Her reading of the terms “queer” and “orientation” as well as “Orientalism” point to how the notion of being a sexualized subject is a matter of being in motion, of “turning” toward one thing or the other; she points out that the Indo-European roots of the word “queer” point to a notion of “twisting”: “Queer is, after all, a spatial term which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a straight line.” Belonging somewhere and finding a home, she argues, is a matter of “extending one’s body into space”; it is a matter of finding one’s direction, one’s orientation toward others; it is a matter of settling into the “new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space.”

Similarly, writing about queer latinxidad, that is, the broad contours of the queer culture that emerge from Spanish-speaking postcolonial nations, Juana María Rodríguez speaks of queer identity as “situatedness in motion: embodiment and spatiality.” Divas, for instance, “are a breathing, swishing, eruption of the divine, a way of being in the world, of claiming power as movement, glances, voice, body and style.”

Queers of color, and in particular those queers of color defined in and through various diasporic movements, have taken up the conditions and strategies of their own displacement as political epistemology and aesthetic project. This dislocatedness and critical “orientation” toward home and homeland are not without pain: exile and the melancholy of not belonging, of being “away,” mark queer of color life and cultural production with a sense of loss that is irrefutable. And yet, these migrations have also rewritten queerness as a category by reclaiming mobility as a productive site experience from which to rethink the political work of sexual and racial non-normativity: What would it mean to rethink “the movement” from within movement itself?

This project would entail, as Muñoz argues in his readings of queer artists and authors such as Frank O’Hara, LeRoi Jones, and Elizabeth Bishop, letting go of totalizing political goals, that is, letting go of the “ends” of political work and instead focusing on the “here and now” as a time and space whose deficiencies spur us on to imagine queerness as a utopian futurity that never arrives: “[U]topia is a stage, not merely a temporal stage, like a phase, but also a spatial one.” Here, Muñoz shifts from the motif of movement to that of gesture: “Queer utopia is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality. The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective...
modality of endurance and support. ... It is a being in, toward, and for futurity.” 33 Queer of color critique arrives at this project by embracing movement as an experience of never-quite-arriving and therefore allowing for the possibility of what-yet-may-be.

Performance, Erotics, and Aesthetics

On a street in downtown Cuba, a transformista named Lili saunters out of her apartment to the sound of catcalls and insults from her neighbors; a transvestite strolls along an urban lake to the sounds of Billie Holliday; a group of young gay men sashay through Washington Square Park as though it were a fashion runway; a butch Latina lesbian in baggy clothes, gold chains, and a do-rag moves slowly downstage, marking each step with a satisfied “uh”; a white man falls in love with a female Chinese opera singer who is biologically male; another falls in love with a transvestite mixed-race woman who only later reveals her penis. 34 Each of these scenes from the canon of critical performances, ethnographic restagings, and cultural productions by queers of color points us to the centrality of performance to queer of color life; each of these subjects walks his or her own fine line between spectacular artifice, a brave truthfulness about who he or she is, and a kind of quotidian danger that freights each bodily gesture with a will-to-be-visible and, even more, a will-to-survive.

In recent years, performance studies has grown in importance as a critical space from within which to examine and render visible modes of living that have been historically obscured. “Performance” can mean many things, and indeed, as Sean Metzger argues in Chapter 2, like “queer,” it is a contested term, one whose very contestation is at the heart of its critical power. Performance may mean an aesthetic or theatrical event; it may also point to the fulfilling of social norms – ways of walking, talking, and “doing” selfhood – that make one’s self legible and acceptable to the social world. As the performances cited at the beginning of this section also suggest, the everyday and aesthetic performances of queers of color speak to ways of being – of moving, of speaking, of dancing, and of living – that collapse those distinctions. To be different – to be brown, to be queer, or to be trans, for instance – in a deeply normative world is by definition to be theatrical, in part because to be unapologetically visible in a world that would much rather you were invisible, or even dead, is by definition to be an event. These performances then are forms of doing selfhood and of claiming theatricality in such a way as to defy a world that is determined to erase the very subject who makes the performance possible. As Muñoz, building on other theorists, showed in his important work
Disidentifications, to enact those performances is also to engage in “world-making” that “delineates the ways in which performances – both theatrical and everyday rituals – have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. ... They are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people.”

Muñoz’s idea of “disidentification” has been central to reshaping the field of queer of color theory, as well as performance studies. For Muñoz, disidentification is a technology by which subaltern peoples, especially queers of color, identify with parts of dominant culture, borrowing and reshaping those parts in order to build lives and worlds within which they can survive. We might understand performance, then, as both ephemeral but also vital to, and defining of, queer of color life. Given its dependence on visuality, citation, and spectacle, performance is an exercise in aesthetics; that is, performance interacts and plays with viewers’ sensory experiences of and responses to an object or person.

These performances are, of course, culturally and historically specific, and yet there are resonances across many of these differences. Consider, for instance, concepts like beauty, drama, and realness. In his seminal discussion of diasporic Filipino men’s “self-making” practices, Martin F. Manalansan IV unpacks the terms “biyuti” and “drama,” which are popularly used in swardspeak, an everyday language spoken by Filipino gay men that borrows from English and Tagalog. Referencing the English word “beauty” but deploying it to different ends than the source to which it refers, “biyuti,” as Manalansan describes it, variously describes selfhood, physical feminine beauty, countenance, or emotional disposition. Similarly, “drama,” a term that most clearly refers to the everyday work of performing the self, draws on theatrical conventions and idioms. Both of these terms, as Manalansan shows, are framed in the particular and shifting terms of diasporic bakla (loosely queer in terms of gender or sexual nonnormativity) culture, and they borrow at times from Tagalog television and cinema melodramas.

The centrality of aesthetics and cultural borrowing to queer of color life is also present in a term like “realness,” which refers, specifically in drag ball culture, to the precision with which a performance mimics the original. And yet, these are not simply aspirational imitations, as categories such as “Butch Queen First Time at a Drag Ball” from the film Paris Is Burning suggests; rather, these are knowing performances of performances that send up the original, to a certain extent the performer, and the culture that pits them against each other.

Aesthetics form, then, a political language within which a community both speaks to itself and with which members may recognize each other. Here one might also think of the “dandy” tradition, taken up by lesbians.
of color throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (by performers and blues women such as Moms Mabley and Bessie Smith), in which women borrowed from and dressed in the sharpest of men’s fashions. This particular expression of female masculinity references but is also distinct from butchness and has historically (although not exclusively, as current expressions of “boi” fashion and desire attest) found its erotic counterpart in queer femme style. Aesthetic performance and playfulness, that is, become part of infusing the everyday with eroticism, which is understood loosely, as Lorde defined it in her foundational essay “The Uses of the Erotic,” as

the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy … so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. … And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible.³⁷

Eroticism, as Lorde understood it in her revolutionary essay, is sexual; but more than that, erotics refers to the infusing of the everyday with a feeling of belonging to and expansively enacting a sense of alignment between self and world. Queer of color critique’s interest in performance brings this specularity, this commitment to wielding visibility against a phobic public sphere, into sharp relief and finds political value in the courage that queers of color contribute to everyday aesthetic practices, ranging from literature, drama, poetry, essays, autobiography, and dance to the movement of bodies in the space and time of everyday life.

NOTES

Although this essay bears my name as author, it was structured and initially researched in collaboration and with the generous participation of Emily A. Owens, who is presently completing her dissertation entitled “Fantasies of Consent: Black Women’s Sexual Labor in 19th Century New Orleans” at Harvard University. The essay bears the imprint of her fierce intelligence and energy, and my only regret is that we were not able to write it together. The readings and research were also completed with the contributions and participation of my Queer of Color Critique class at Pomona College in the fall of 2014. It has been my goal to write this piece as collaboratively as possible, borrowing from the model of collective writing spearheaded by women of color feminism, in particular the collectives that produced the critical anthologies This Bridge Called My Back, Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, and many others. The writing here echoes my colleagues’ and students’ ideas, and any lapses or gaps are my fault alone.

¹ The term itself, however, is generally credited to Roderick A. Ferguson, Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
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8 I thank my student William Mullaney for his thesis and insights into McKay’s *Banjo*.


10 As Barbara Christian, wrote in “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987): 51–63: “I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assaults on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanities” (52). The foundational writing of women of color feminism in the 1980s and 1990s laid potent claim to literature, in particular to poetry, as a writing practice from which experience could be theorized. Examples include Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1981); and Barbara Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983).
The term “warrior” was claimed by Audre Lorde in her self-titling as “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.” See Joan Wylie Hall, *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), vii.


Here one might consider Mark Rifkin’s insights in *When Did Indians Become Straight?* about how queer and other liberation movements have either co-opted ideas of Native American kinship or occluded Native sovereignty claims in order to articulate their own political agendas. For counterexamples to these strategies drawn from the canon of Native American LGBTQ literature, see Rifkin’s discussions of Beth Brant’s 1992 story collection *Mohawk Trail* as well as Craig Womack’s 2001 *Drowning in Fire*.


Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 132.


Ibid., 91.

