

Trans Feminine People of Color, “Queer” Spaces, and Urban Colonialism: A Case Study of Seattle

How do local, national, and transnational constructions of naturalness regarding sexuality/gender, the body, race, space, and citizenship feed into the routine displacement and erasure of trans feminine BIPOC?

What effects do Seattle’s land-use policies and carceral solutions to heterosexist violence have on perceptions of safety for trans feminine BIPOC?

CN: mention of violence, death



Activist CeCe McDonald

To echo Halberstam, I seek to “create an archive capable of providing a record of the complex interactions of race, class, gender, and sexuality that result in murder, but whose origins lie in state-authorized formations of racism, homophobia, and poverty. Justice in the end lies in the unraveling of the crime not simply in its solution, and when we cease to unravel we become collaborators”¹.

Background:

This research aims to explore the ways that social inequalities are spatially articulated, looking specifically at the relationship transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming feminine BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) have to spaces designated as “queer”. The timing is dire; violence and murder enacted on trans femme BIPOC is at record rates. I work to analyze the role of the state in negotiating social and sexual identities of place and uncover what implications arise for trans feminine BIPOC when “queer” spaces and the state collaborate. “Queer” spaces generally assume neighborhoods, bars, parades, and the like. Through the lens of colonialism and necropolitics, I evaluate how “queer” spaces, citizenship, and racialized gender norms have come to be distinguished and guarded.

What Makes This Environmental Studies?

The heart of my inquiry is in asking how notions of “naturalness” figure into the material conditions of life for trans femme BIPOC. This critical scholarship engages with a range of topics from pollution to purity, colonialism to conservationism, neoliberalism to city-planning, scientific racism to gender norms, slavery to prisons, migration to environmental psychology, desire to death. I strive to trouble a politics of disposability which marks trans femme BIPOC for death.

Methodology:

Process of discursive analysis in fields including trans studies, trans feminism, ethnic studies, queer theory, post-modern geography, prison abolition, ecocriticism, the history of the built environment and more. Priority of voices given to trans femme BIPOC, as experts of own, varied experiences.

Syllabus Outcome:

I have curated an accessible and interactive medium of learning through a digital syllabus, built as a website, and complemented by a paper. Syllabus is intended for folks who are familiar with or have never approached such topics. Check link in right hand corner!

Case Study of Seattle:

- City named after Indigenous chief whose land was stolen by white settlers; reputation as a boldly progressive urban government that serves as a model for the future
- Long-term residents are being displaced in the gay neighborhood, Capitol Hill (born in 1960s) and the historically-Black neighborhood, Central District (born from redlining), through patterns of selective reinvestment, out-pricing, and migration.
- Seattle recently implemented a program to combat mounting anti-trans and anti-queer violence through a “Safe Place” partnership among Starbucks, other corporations, and the local police department.
- Among attacks, a Black drag performer named Adé Côneère was misread as a trans woman and beat in public last summer.
- In other realms of policy, city’s “liberal” sex work laws punish buyers rather than sellers. However, sex workers, some of whom are trans femme BIPOC, call for sex work’s total decriminalization.
- Seattle’s #BlackLivesMatter protests advocate for decarceration and prison abolition through notion that no one is disposable; Adé Côneère recalls trip to police more traumatic than attack; public and private employees trained to ‘report’ hate crimes often profile trans femme BIPOCs as suspicious or sex workers (hence the crime nicknamed: “walking while trans”).
- Recent study links the displacement of poor Black & brown residents in Seattle to environmental racism (being pushed out in closer proximity to polluting industries, areas that will flood).
- Washington state among many to witness rise of “bathroom bills”, or increased policing of non-normative gendered and racialized bodies.

Results:

“Queer” spaces fold under post-modern geography critiques, which recognize, among points, that “queer” spaces are more often than not, havens for cisgender white gay men who have had greater access to wealth. Part of this is that whiteness operates as property; queer calls for protection in the nation-state (through hate crime laws, etc) have reinforced class and racial stratifications of post-war urban space by constructing the poor and BIPOC as perpetrators of anti-queer and anti-trans violence, predisposed (naturally) to criminality, and poverty, erasing queer/trans BIPOC, and ignoring anti-trans/queer violence as regular practices of the state. Cis gays tend to be canaries to next stages of development.

“Queer” inclusion in the nation-state stabilizes settler occupation, and is predicated on lines of displaying “good” citizenship, which extends to the ideologically and capitally productive. Those perceived to not be engaged in the formal economy, are BIPOC, or who stray from “normative” genders are seen as threatening, which coalesces into “displacement and erasure (as being) inevitable” or natural.²

Gender, race, and sexuality, far from biological fact, are historically-constructed, culturally-contingent, and incomplete categories rooted in colonial exchanges that hold today. Trans femme BIPOC existence represents pathology and moral corruptness precisely for challenging said categories, imbued in citizenship.

Carceral solutions expand a tool of state that disproportionately ensnares trans femme BIPOC and does not address cross-cultural social productions of murder, violence, transmisogyny, poverty, and the like; police do not spell safety for marginalized.

Larger Implications:

Environmental justice can recalibrate to consider a prison abolitionist standpoint, which relays the logic that no one is disposable. As Seattle demonstrates, those most affected by climate change and policing are poor, BIPOC, and/or trans femme, often displaced from areas experiencing rapid reinvestment. How can these voices be centered in policy changes like city planning? How can we build communities that emphasize transformative justice? The pursuit of answering these inquiries rests on profound and grave implications.

Further References

[Captive Genders, Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex](#), edited Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith.
[Safe Place, Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence](#) by Christina Handhardt.
[In a Queer Time and Place; Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives](#) by Judith Halberstam.
 “Walking While Transgender; Necropolitical Regulations of Trans Feminine Bodies of Colour” by Elijah Edelman.
[The Ecological Other](#) by Sarah Jacquette Ray.

