

From the Kitchen Table to the Streets: Queer of Colour Reflections on Racial Capitalism

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I have been thinking about gender, sexuality, race and capitalism in relation to several conjunctures, from the war on terror and the backlash against multiculturalism to neoliberal urban development and, most recently, COVID-19. I have done so in conversation with a promiscuous array of theorists, who situate themselves in a range of formations, from queer of colour and critical ethnic to Black and Indigenous studies, and who work with a range of concepts, from post- and anticolonial takes on biopolitics and necropolitics to racial capitalism (e.g. Combahee River Collective Statement 1983, Coulthard 2014, Ferguson 2004, Haritaworn, Kuntsman & Posocco 2014, Melamed 2015, Pulido 2016, Robinson 1983, Simpson 2013, Thompson 2021). This article revisits some of my projects related to this and concludes in what I propose as a specifically queer engagement with racial capitalism.

My earlier work (Haritaworn 2012, 2015; Haritaworn, Kuntsman & Posocco eds. 2014) was set in Britain and Germany, in two Northwest European liberal democracies, in the 2000s and 2010s. The contexts I explored prided themselves in the melancholic remains of their welfare state but actively embraced neoliberal policies that are

premised upon more abandonment of poor people and people of colour. These projects interrogated the valorization of certain minoritized figures, including the mixed-race Londoner, the *multikulti* Berliner, the queer lover, and the transgender victim of hate crime. They sought to shed light on moments when white supremacy, in order to manufacture consent, (still) needed to disguise itself as care, protection and love of minorities.

I describe these as figures rather than identities or necessarily even locations because those thus interpellated can only ever perform themselves in proximity to them (Skeggs 1997). We may be liberal democracy's "exalted subjects," in Sunera Thobani's (2007) words, but our belonging is conditional upon the eviction of Others. It is often fleeting, always shaky, and never taken for granted. Our performances frequently fail, as our embodied lives regularly spill beyond these moulds. For example, many mixed-race people disappoint expectations in our perfect bilingualism, as neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed 2011) turns out to be assimilationist: it erases the very differences it claims to valorize (Haritaworn 2012). Similarly, the queer lover, that pet child of neoliberal multiculturalism since the mid-2000s, often fails to be lovely,

especially in hir gender non-conforming varieties. Under cis-heteropatriarchy, disgust, neglect and eviction have remained the knee-jerk responses to our bodies and intimacies, even while imagined communities at various scales – from city, nation, Europe to the West – were busily inventing new traditions of LGBT-friendliness (Haritaworn 2015). While certain racial and sexual figures, then, have risen in appreciation, the value that capital is able to extract from our embodied life force dwarfs whatever dividends we are situationally able to gain for ourselves.

Crucially, these trade-offs ghost those whose difference is not considered valuable. In *Biopolitics of Mixing* (Haritaworn 2012), I discussed this in relation to a mixed-race subject whose hybridity has Others in those who do not mix enough. The case studied in *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others* (Haritaworn 2015) is the queer lover who comes to life in the gentrifying inner city in Berlin, and in the shadow of hateful Others who are profiled, policed and displaced as the descendants of labour migrants, more recently refigured as Muslims (Yildiz 2009). The cultural tale of queer love and protection thus manufactures consent for practices of punishment and displacement that refigure racialized disposability in the registers of progress, rights, care and protection.

I describe these situationally desirable figures, whose occurrence is specific to their particular conjunctures in the liberal democracies that I have studied, as transitional objects. They are transitional since they urge, however incompletely and subject to mounting resistance, a turning of pages from one chapter of capitalism to the next – from a neoliberal multicultural regime that (however briefly) spoke the language of welfare, albeit in a symbolic 'diversity' discourse that is anathema to redistribution, to a regime that outrightly abandons and dehumanizes without needing to resort to a *minoritarian* register of care. My concept of transitionality is a tongue-in-cheek spin on childhood psychologist Winnicott (1953), who discussed how transitional objects help children fall asleep with less and less parental involvement (akin to the withdrawal of the neoliberal state) (Haritaworn 2015). In the end, the child can sleep

by themselves and the teddy bear gets thrown out. I argue that something similar may be happening to the figure of the rescuable LGBT subject. After helping cis-heteropatriarchal subjects, including progressives who like to 'do the right thing,' – to accept and get used to policing and abandonment as signs of care –, the queer lover's value has dropped. As indicated by the current wars over trans people's pronouns, trigger warnings, callout culture and identity politics; the attacks on sex education and reproductive rights (including gender affirmative health care); and the backlash against critical race-, gender-, migration-, and post-colonial studies in media and political debates, the regime we are now transitioning into is an unself-consciously oppressive one. White supremacy no longer needs its teddy bears but is happy to throw them under the bus.

In the era of COVID-19, the irreconcilable contradictions of racial capitalism are increasingly plain to see, making some dents in the universal claims of both neoliberal, welfare and, in those contexts where they are available, public health discourses. Corona has laid bare the necropolitical distinctions between the properly alive (Foucault 2004/1978) and the living dead (Mbembe 2012), between those who are recognized as vulnerable to the virus and deserving of home offices, vaccines, ventilators, ICU beds and categorization as high risk or 'priority', and those who are a *risk* – whose greater morbidity and mortality is acceptable and must be managed so that the economy can go on. My current research (Haritaworn 2021) on the transformation of safety at the conjuncture of protest and pandemic explores how working-class migrants, Black people, Indigenous people and people of colour are once more banished from the fold of those whose lives are prioritized for safety and care. In Germany, my current site, this manifests as a refusal to even acknowledge the structural vulnerabilities of non-white people to the virus. Here, race and class are not considered in the definition of priority groups to be vaccinated, or in the design of data on the population's morbidity and mortality from the virus. Like others, this is a context where public health research and policies are race evasive (Afrozensus n.d.). And as

so often, this evasion claims to right past wrongs while punishing mention of their reverberations in the present. Thus, in Germany, collecting ethnic data is not acceptable since it echoes National Socialism – yet leaving racial Others to die apparently does not. At the same time, non-white people are once more hyper-visible as deviant folk devils, in Hall et al.'s (1978) terms, that can be scapegoated in times of crisis (Haritaworn 2015) – this time as infectious vectors of the coronavirus.

Queer of colour frameworks are helpful in explaining how the disentanglement from care of racialized subjects and communities is produced culturally. As I argue based on my recent analysis of the German media and political debates of COVID-19 (Haritaworn 2021), rising numbers nationwide were at key moments in the pandemic explained through the established tropes of failed (cis-)genders and (hetero-)sexualities that queer of colour theorists have long drawn attention to (Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2004; Haritaworn 2015): from large amorphous families that congregate during weddings or iftars, to reckless border crossers who import variants through visits 'back home', to protestors who refuse to stay home, to disaffected youth who hang out on street corners and pick fights with police, to overcrowded ghettos, where whole housing blocks can be put under quarantine if they are portrayed as spaces of Roma or Muslim residence. In contrast to these degenerate intimacies, whose dysfunctional reproductivity has now gone viral, the white cis-heteropatriarchal family and its nostalgically figured members – the child who suffers from school closure, the grandparent awaiting vaccination in the nursing home – have claimed near-exclusive airtime as vulnerable populations in need of protection. In this straightened landscape, minoritarian subjects do not count as worthy of protection. While queer support networks and chosen families have been recloseted and recriminalized under the household rules, poor racialized subjects have been disproportionately declared 'essential workers'. Their chronic daily risk of contracting COVID is accepted as an inevitable factor to be managed for the sake of the economy (see Haritaworn 2021).

Despite the heightened visibility of the unequal conditions of working and living that render social distancing and other safety measures impossible for many, the actual contradictions that produce environmental racism and structural abandonment remain obfuscated (Gilmore 2002; Pulido 2016). Again, a queer of colour framework that actively converses with theories of racial capitalism is conducive here. The term racial capitalism emerged in various geographic sites in the late 1970s and early 1980s,¹ as part of transnational debates within the Black radical tradition (Kelley 2002). In *Black Marxism*, the book that is frequently cited to explain the term, Cedric Robinson (1983) defined capitalism as always already racial. To prevent any misunderstandings, racial capitalism, according to Robinson, is not a stage or variation of 'regular' capitalism. Rather, as Melamed (2015) and Pulido (2016) each explain, capitalism has, since its early European origins, relied on racialized distinctions. Indeed, capitalist accumulation requires the prior cultural production of degenerate and devalued populations that can be displaced, dispossessed, incarcerated, put to work, or prematurely killed, depending on capital's current requirements. While historically this occurred through conquest and enslavement, the same logics pervade contemporary regimes of border imperialism (Walia 2012), resource extraction, urban development and other forms of land grabbing, as well as the prison industrial complex (Gilmore 2007; Coulthard 2014; Pulido 2017). Queer of colour theories are again helpful in explaining how these exploitable differences are produced through notions of improper and inferior genders and sexualities – from the welfare queen, to the Black mugger, to the hateful Muslim/Arab/Turkish homophobe, to the criminally infectious rulebreaker who is scapegoated for COVID-19 (Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2004, Hall et al. 1978, Haritaworn 2015; Haritaworn 2021).

Beyond the important and often devalued work of critique, queer of colour methodologies – both organic and academic – help us rehearse ways out of this and other crises. In my current empirical research on community responses to COVID-19, which is grounded in interviews with

queer and antiracist activists, I explore transformations of safety that are happening outside of the system in marginalized communities in Berlin and Toronto. Examples for this include the pods, bubbles and care collectives that are being forged in queer communities, often in direct transgression of the official household rules, as well as the mass organizing that has happened throughout the pandemic. In Germany in 2020, thousands took to the streets to demonstrate for Black Lives – at least 15,000 in Berlin in June alone – and to commemorate the victims of the racist mass murder in Hanau on February 19, 2020. Labelled superspreader events by media and politicians, these protests were themselves sites where abolitionist models of care and relationship building were developed. Importantly, they rehearsed safer modes of collectivity, at a time when conservative notions of domesticity, privacy, and isolation were still presented as the main solution to the pandemic. While irreducible to a single-issue queer politic, safer sex and other queer methodologies of safety and protection in the face of a virus that will never go away were crucial in these transformations of justice, safety and care (Haritaworn 2021).

In this, I join other writings by queer and trans Black, Indigenous and people of colour that dedicate themselves to the task of prefiguring alternatives to racial capitalism and settler colonialism (e.g. Brown 2019; Dixon & Lakshmi-Samarasinha eds 2020; Million 2013; Thompson 2021). These prefigurations are characterized by a creative engagement with the palimpsestic counter-archives of the past (Alexander 2006). They bypass dominant identity debates, hangovers from late 1990s queer, postmodernist and other theories that, however important in their historical contexts, treat identity as something that is pre-modern, pre-theoretical and incompatible with change (and whose strawperson has suspiciously often worn the face of a Black lesbian). They forge utopian temporalities that are decidedly pro-future, pro-past and pro-revolution, and refuse an end of history. Much of this intense dreaming (Million 2013) takes place in science fiction and other creative genres (Brown & Imarisha eds. 2015; Gossett in Gossett, Stanley and Burton 2019; Simpson

2013). I recently co-edited two anthologies on queer and trans Black, Indigenous and people of colour spaces and histories in Toronto as part of a research team that we called *Marvellous Grounds* in commemoration of the Afrosurrealism of Suzanne Césaire (Kelley). Césaire argued that we need art in order to get us ready for the marvellous (Haritaworn, Moussa & Ware 2018 a, b, *MarvellousGrounds.com*). The same leap into a better future was invoked in the famous Combahee River Collective Statement in 1977 by Black lesbian feminists in Boston, who actively embraced a revolutionary left-wing politic, while also distancing themselves from the racism and cis-heterosexism of the white left establishment (Combahee River Collective 1983).

In short, theories of racial capitalism give us not just diagnostics, but roadmaps for winning against Capital and the racial state. This is a moment when many are gaining clarity that things cannot continue this way, thanks in no small part to the labour done and risks taken by Black people – including in white-dominated queer spaces themselves. A well-known example is the Black Lives Matter intervention into World Pride in Toronto that resulted in a commitment by Pride Toronto to march without the police in the future (Black Lives Matter Toronto 2016). However, it also resulted in a witch hunt against the activists that should caution us against non-consensually claiming BLM for a single-issue queer movement, Marxist or otherwise, that has yet to reckon with its anti-Black and other violent exclusions. As Rodney Diverlus of BLM-To stated in the short film *Black Trans Lives Matter. Black Queer Lives Matter*:

We have never faced as much vile, spewed hate, threats, as what we get from the queer community from last year's actions (Black Lives Matter Toronto 2017).

In contrast, writers on racial and colonial capitalism have long located themselves in revolutionary genealogies – from the Black Radical Tradition to Indigenous decolonization to prison abolition. These legacies of unfinished revolution resist competitive binaries between activism and

scholarship. They prefigure alternatives to the murderous present, alternatives to the state even. Queer and trans Black, Indigenous and people of colour worldings, with their capacity to embody the impossible, desire the unrealistic, and dream

big in small spaces – from the street corner to the kitchen table, the ballroom, the self-organized shelter, or the trans and non-binary clothing exchange – have a particular role to play in these transformations.

Notes

- ¹ In particular, Robinson's theorizing was indebted to South African debates about the relationship between racism, colonialism and capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Neville Alexander's (1979) *One Azania, One Nation*. This preempts an understanding of theories of racial capitalism as parochial to the US, or of Black European thought as foreign to Europe (Thompson, Facebook update, 13 May 2022, see also Thompson 2021).

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