

Introduction: Queering Blackness: Non-Binary Black Representations in Post-Obama Popular Cultures

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The 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama unleashed an extraordinary surge of hope across the United States: that a Black man could attain the highest office of the land seemed to signal the beginning of a new, progressive era – not only in terms of racial equality but also for the rights of the LGBTQ+¹ community. Alluding to his support for same-sex marriage, Obama referenced the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in his second Inaugural Address: “Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law” (Obama 2013). For many, the words “brothers” and “sisters” had a special ring coming out of a Black man’s mouth. Is it a coincidence that unprecedented legal progress² at the Federal level for gays and lesbians came about during the first and only U.S. Black presidency?

¹ The acronym “LGBTQ+” stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Queer, and Others.” It is used as an umbrella term to designate people who identify outside heteronormativity.

² *Obergefell v. Hodges*, on June 26, 2015, ruled that the 14th Amendment adopted in 1868 to ensure Black citizenship and equal protection under the law required all states to license marriages between same-sex couples.

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This message of inclusion of same-sex couples in the U.S. nation, through the symbolism of marriage, must be linked to the very vision of Obama as the beginning of a new, ostensibly post-racial era in the USA (Fox; Tesler). Yet, this post-racial society did not come to be, as the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin at the hands of a White neighborhood watch volunteer painfully showed, followed by many more Black victims of police brutality in subsequent years. All remaining hope disappeared in 2016 with the election of the overtly racist and anti-trans, anti-queer, highly binary, all-White male Trump/Pence ticket: the political pendulum had clearly swung to the right.

The civil rights obtained during Obama's terms were targeted by the Trump presidency. When, in 2017, White Supremacists held a rally in Charlottesville which resulted in the death of an antiracist protester, Trump referred to those involved as "very fine people on both sides," even as he worked to erode LGBTQ+ rights. Race, gender and sexual orientation were all under attack.

The very idea of "queering Blackness" may well sound like a tautology to some and an oxymoron to others. Is queerness fundamentally defined by White privilege? Is Blackness always already queer? Both questions must be answered in the negative and yet they may ring true under certain circumstances.

In *Gender Norms & Intersectionality*, Riki Wilchins asserts: "gender stereotypes are always raced, just as racial stereotypes are always gendered. So factors like gender and race and class are always intertwined" (32). When, in 2001, E. Patrick Johnson published his seminal article about "quare" studies (quotations in the original text), part of his endeavor was to describe the tension between queerness on the one hand, and race and class on the other, a tension he approached from the inside in an attempt to "suture the gap" between queer studies and categories of race and class ("'Quare' Studies" 13). For Johnson, quoting from Anzaldù (250), queer as an umbrella term erases the specific experience of other races, classes, and ethnicities. In response, quare articulates identities and positively reconciles queer with race and class ("'Quare' Studies" 3).

In the third decade of the 21st century, queerness and Blackness are visibly connected in American culture, whether through media giants like RuPaul or Lil Naz X, widely influential writers like Roxane Gay or Danez Smith, political figures such as Lori Lighfoot or Ron Oden, or world-famous activists like Angela Davis or #BLM founders Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi – two of whom identify as queer. As the present generation continues the long struggle for

civil rights and equal rights for oppressed peoples in North America and around the world, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has made unprecedented efforts to be inclusive in very diverse ways, opening itself up to grassroots initiatives to avoid the blind spots of the past, and to criticism for never fully achieving that goal.

Despite unparalleled queer Black visibility in terms of sheer numbers, media representations at the intersection of racial and genderqueer identities remain scarce. This becomes obvious when focusing on non-binary³ representations which, as a sub-category, are certainly scarcer than queer representations in general, and particularly so when it comes to racial minorities.

A recent Gallup survey revealed that 20% of Gen Z Americans (born 1997-2003) identify as LGBTQ+, with rising trends in all categories. African Americans represent between 12 and 14%, which is consistent with overall demographics (Jones; McNabb 27). Non-binary categories have yet to enter these sanctioned surveys and non-binary identity may well be prevalent amongst individuals not yet included in said studies for they have not yet reached surveyable age. Children and teenagers are, however, heavy consumers of popular culture, which may be one factor pushing TV productions to incorporate non-binary characters, including in animated series such as *Steven Universe*, as Melvin L. Williams and Christin M. Smith note in their article about Lil Uzi Vert's *032c* Interview. Because they are still largely foreign to older generations, non-binary gender identities tend to remain an afterthought of queer studies when such questions might well be on the way to taking center stage in the ever-evolving aspirations of the genderqueer revolution.

Just as the concept of gender is socially constructed (Beauvoir; Butler), the concept of race is based on logic that lies in prejudice and oppression, not in biological distinctions that utterly fail to live up to the standards of what defines

³ Non-binarism, as an umbrella term, refers to any gender identity that is not exclusively male or female. Compared to "genderqueerness," non-binarism does not refer to sexuality or relationships, and compared to "gender fluidity," it does not emphasize any kind of variation in one's identity over time – but does not exclude it either. Non-binary identity may include the absence of gender (agender), demi or bi-genderism, multiple genders (pangenderism, gender fluidity), transgenderism, two-spiritism and other ancestral forms of gender non-binarism, including metaphorically inspired by species outside the human race (plants, objects) under yet another umbrella term, xenogenderism (McNabb 3-12, 33-53). This special issue does not pretend to address all these notions, far from it, but it attempts to specifically study non-binarism as opposed to, and sometimes combined to, queerness per se.

race in the animal realm (Wright 135). In other words, there is only one human race, and the way in which superficial variations have been posited as valid criteria to separate one race into several is ungrounded yet very real.

Feminist and trans activism have naturally mirrored anti-racist questioning of categories: is gender binarism, a concept so strongly engrained in social practices, family dynamics, and language itself, as flawed as racial categorization? Is it possible to stand outside the rigid female/male fixation that seems to define so much of our lives, from Oscar categories to bathroom signs? (McNabb 19-22) Is there in fact a spectrum, an in-between, an immense diversity similar to how racial categories can never be bound? And do Black non-binary representations therefore have a role to play in the demystification of gender binarism? We believe they do.

This special issue examines non-binary Black representations in popular cultures since 2008 from a transdisciplinary and intersectional perspective. It interrogates how old models may be transcended and reinterpreted and at the same time, reproduce age-old stereotypes in modern disguise. Beyond reappropriating Blackness through performance (Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*), the question of Black queer representation(s) is also linked to the idea of commodification and reception by both Black and queer/non-binary people, and by mainstream audiences. In the introduction to *Are You Entertained? Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, editors Simone C. Drake and Dwan K. Henderson write:

the steroidal commodification of Black popular culture has long raised a different set of concerns about value, consumption, and incorporation into the U.S. body politic for contemporary Black cultural producers, as accompanying mass consumption is a phenomenon of deracination that has sometimes shifted the meaning of “Black” in Black popular culture.

(3)

How, then, have the intersections of Blackness, queerness, and non-binary identities been depicted in recent years, whether in mainstream culture or within LGBTQ+ communities? How are stereotypes countered to “queer” the monolithic depictions of Blackness on the one hand and of non-binary identities on the other, to enable the intersections of identities – and particularly non-binary Black identities? What is the significance of such portrayals on non-binary Black individuals as well as general audiences.

This special issue starts with a 5-article and 3-interview-strong musical section. In “The Queer Spaces of Black Dance Music,” Claude Chastagner contextualizes the queer origins of Black dance music and, in doing so, questions the racial and gender binaries that have overdetermined the reception of both Black and queer dance music, going back to the early 20th century. Chastagner’s study is supported by two interviews with two music insiders, Detroit music activist legend Damon “Magic” Percy, founder of Club Heaven in the 1980s, and dance scholar, educator, and founder of Black Girl Brilliance, Takiyah Nur Amin. Lauron Kherer continues the conversation with an article entitled “‘You Bitches Wouldn’t Get It’: Queer Ludonarrativity in Lil Nas X’s ‘Late To Da Party (F*CK BET)’,” which digs more specifically into world-famous gay/bisexual rapper Lil Nas X’s use of non-binary aesthetics to impose queer discourse in hip hop culture. Mathieu Perrot and Glenn Smith expand from non-binary musical representations to the realm of poetry with “From Shadows to Spotlight: Exploring Black Queer Aesthetics and Politics in the Works of Lil Nas X and Danez Smith,” in which poetics feeds politics to deliver a resounding message of existence through artistic voices. The article, already strengthened by direct quotes from the artists in various media, is augmented by an interview with New York singer, songwriter, and performer L’Marco. Emilie Souyri follows up with a pedagogical journey into the dialectic feminism of butch lesbian gangsta rapper Young M.A, and a call for intergenerational dialogue that may be key to grasp the subtleties of non-binary quare representations. This lengthy musical prelude ends on an ironic title by co-authors Melvin L. William and Christin Smith, “‘I Never Hesitated:’ A Quare Analysis of Rap Binarism and Lil Uzi Vert’s *032c* Interview.” Through discourse analysis, the article focuses on the July 2023 interview given when the artist was summoned to explain their public switch to “they/them” pronouns on social media, a bold move rooted in long-standing support from friends and family. To declare there was no hesitation is paradoxical for an artist just shy of their 28th birthday, active since 2010, and arguably quite famous since 2016. At the same time, taken at face value, it is certainly a mark of the changing times, with non-binary Black identity now fully part of hip hop culture.

Departing from the world of music and lyrics, Frédéric Herbin’s article delves into the world of voguing and ballroom culture as he discusses the hiring of the legendary Leiomy Maldonado for a Black Opal cosmetics marketing campaign in 2021. Cosmetics represent a market strongly divided along gender and racial lines so that hiring a trans, Afro-Puerto Rican activist and dancer, founder of the House

of Amazon, is certainly a stepping stone in terms of breaking binaries. After all, voguing sprang from the impossible dream of AfroLatinx youths to enter the world of high fashion and see their faces in shiny magazines, and the Black Opal campaign did just that, albeit to market a product.

The last two articles converge on non-binary representation in fiction, with Laura Goudet focusing on video games and Elizabeth Mullen on legendary character Lafayette in *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-14). The very title of Laura Goudet's article about video games, "Quare Representations *In Absentia*," underlines the difficulty some authors have had to even find Black non-binary representations to discuss. Goudet makes the rare choice of acknowledging the very limited results of their search for non-binary quare characters in mainstream video games, forcing them to focus on non-human metaphors whose gender ambiguity is intrinsically connected to their racial otherness. More so than video games, mainstream TV-series increasingly introduce non-binary queer and quare characters. Mullen considers the adaptation of a somewhat minor character of *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, Lafayette Reynolds, from book to TV-series, and underlines the quare expansion of the self-proclaimed Black sissy in a proud break from stereotypical gender binaries.

As anti-trans, anti-drag, anti-gay-rights bills are being passed, vetoed, and pushed up again in more states than we wish to count, non-binary gender identities sound both overtly radical and soothingly neutral. Is it the ultimate cure to sexism as it strips the issue of its very foundation, or an attempt to destroy the balance of human society? Do non-binary Black representations fundamentally question the need for categories to make sense of the world or are they just one more subdivision with their own codifications and paths of entry? Hopefully, reading this collection of articles will push these questions forward on the pendulum of American culture.

The authors wish to warmly thank their research labs for their unwavering financial and moral support throughout the two years that this project ran, namely TransCrit, at Université Paris 8 and EMMA, at Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3. They would also like to extend their thanks to all the anonymous experts who have greatly strengthened this special issue, to the talented editor of *PCSJ* CarrieLynn D. Reinhard. The team work has been a gift throughout.

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