

**Cathy Cohen Remarks upon receiving the Kessler Award
#DoBlackLivesMatter? From Michael Brown to CeCe McDonald
On Black Death and LGBTQ Politics
Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS)
Elebash Auditorium, The Graduate Center, CUNY
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Video available online: <http://videostreaming.gc.cuny.edu/videos/video/2494/>

[Introductions by Jafari Allen, Vanessa Agard Jones, Katherine Acey.]

Cohen: Wow. Can everyone hear me? I'm a little choked up and that's rare for me, trust me. I kept thinking, I mean, I'll say more in a minute about how beautiful the comments were but I kept thinking, 'this must be what it's like to live at your funeral.' [laughter] People say really nice things.... Did I really call you in South Africa? Are you sure that was me?

I'm overwhelmed. I don't know how to give a talk after that. I'll tell one quick story then I'll really try to get to the talk. Beth can testify to this, I've been so worried about this talk...up at five in the morning, up late to like one or two, which is late for me these days for me now. Trying to figure out what to say, what to say, what to say, because you know, as a working-class black girl in the academy, you still never quite believe you're good enough. So, there's been this sort of, how do I perform so that I'm good enough for this award, or smart enough for this award, and just kind of preparing, no, just getting here and seeing the people that I've spent my life with organizing or writing, it just feels like you guys will, we're just gonna go on a ride with this talk, and it might not be the best talk I ever gave but who cares, because we're in the room together. And, it's just kind of an incredible moment, so thank you very much.

[applause]

No, no – don't clap for that. I'm just joking.

I do want to start, really, by thanking the Board of CLAGS for this incredible, wonderful honor. Part of my angst, I have one other story, before I start, I received a beautiful email from John D'Emilio, who we love. And the email was like, congratulations, you're so deserving of this award. Then he said, "I was a wreck before I gave my talk."

[laughter]

He was like, "There's so much pressure to do well, Cathy." I was like, "thank you, John."

[more laughter]

So, this is just a really wonderful honor, but....it's just a really wonderful honor. And, it's a special honor because I used to be a board member, we were talking about this, so I am humbled by the acknowledgment, particularly at this moment when so many of the communities and the movements that I've studied and worked with and loved are fighting, literally, for their lives and their humanity.

I also want to thank Yanna, who has been extraordinary in pulling this together.

[applause]

Following up on emails when I didn't respond and never being upset with me, and doing all this lovingly, and doing all this with great, great thoughtfulness and care. ' I want to thank Katherine, Vanessa and Jafari for just really, beautiful, generous, loving introductions. You each represent kind of overlapping facets of my life and my communities, and you hopefully know that I love each one of you. And, I really can't thank you enough, I'll try to explain it to you later, but I can't thank you enough for being here. And, what a pleasure to have Ella in the audience, even though she has on her – hey, you heard me, even with your headphones on! – and I told her to put on the headphones and I'll explain why later. Finally, I have to thank, I want to thank, I can't imagine moving any further in this talk without mentioning the wonderful, beautiful, really brilliant and radical Beth Richie. .. [applause] You can clap for her, yes!

[applause]

I am very lucky to call her the love of my life, and the love of *our* life is Ella Carmen Cohen Richie, who is an incredible kid. She's just the best. I can't imagine doing this work, let alone enjoying and loving life, without the two of them, and I thank you so much.

Ok, I know you're like, is this an academy award speech? [laughter] Ok, enough of that, enough of my homonormativity. [laughter] You know, it's true.

So, tonight, as the title of my talk suggests, I want to discuss whether and how black lives matter in LGBT politics. Does the struggle or movement that we see unfolding daily on our streets and highways and city halls and shopping centers across the country and really across the world matter to the lives of LGBT individuals, and maybe more importantly for the talk today, to LGBT organizations? I'm especially interested in the conditions of what I'm calling 'political solidarity.' How do we differentiate between a performative versus a substantive solidarity? I'm concerned that many of the organizations that seem to dominate the LGBT public sphere are engaged in what we might call a contradictory project, of performing solidarity with this kind of new, black, youth-led movement while substantively being complicit with a dominant neo-liberal structure whose racial politics will always threaten the lives of people of color, and in particular, poor black people. Finally, I want all of us to think about how the current structure of this movement, this moment might begin to actualize a new radical queer politics led by people of color.

I'm going to deliver this lecture in three parts, or we might call them three acts, just to kind of break it up, each is intended to build on the last, (fingers crossed). The first is titled, Multicultural Neoliberalism and the Unmaking of Michael Brown, and that briefly explores how neoliberal policies, I think, serve as the backdrop for the violence and resistance we are witnessing at this moment.

The second section titled, Performing Solidarity: LGBT Complicity Equals Black Death (aside: you like the titles, eh? – laughter - They're long titles for little sections, but that's alright), interrogates the current racialized politics of LGBT organizations and their re-occurring compromise with and cooptation by neoliberalism. Let me just say that this is a well-traveled theme, this second section, but I believe that we should at least, briefly reimagine or rediscover it now.

The third section is titled, This is Not the Civil Rights Movement: The Queering of Black Liberation. In this section, I try to briefly revisit, actually, my earlier work in Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens, [applause – thank you!] suggesting that radical black liberation is taking the form of what many of us imagined a radical queer politics might look like.

Multicultural Neoliberalism and the Unmaking of Michael Brown

So, I want to get started with section one, but before I get started I want to show you a video. This video is pretty explicit, but it's meant to actually re-center us to remind us what this talk and what this movement is about.

[A 2 minute video of the murders of Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Kaijeme Powell, Oscar Grant, Tamir Rice edited together.]

According to Darren Wilson, the officer who killed Michael Brown on the street in Ferguson, Missouri, Michael Brown had super-human strength. Wilson referred to the unarmed, black teenager as similar to “Hulk Hogan” in strength. He told reporter George Stephanopolous that when Brown turned around to look at him, he looked like a “demon.” As I watched the interview with Wilson, I wondered: how does one come to view a young man, with no gun, who had just graduated from high school, and who was actually not that much bigger than Wilson, how do you come to see him with such venom, such disregard, and such fear? Similarly, how do police in Cleveland, Ohio, in the wake Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Iyana Jones, and Eric Garner killings, take less than two seconds to kill a 12-year-old Tamir Rice as he holds a toy gun?

Now, journalists, politicians and even some activists have pitched these stories as struggles between young men who we are told “aren't angels” and police officers and vigilantes who we are told are “fearing for their lives.” And while a narrative on these encounters that focuses on personalities of both victim and killer serves the

media, what has too often been minimized is the larger political context, which helped to produce the aggressive policing that has proven to be fatal in black communities. So, for just a moment, I want to pull the story back and talk about the larger political context and the role of neoliberalism in the unmaking of Michael Brown.

Now, by neoliberalism I mean, a prioritizing of markets and a corresponding commitment to the dismantling or devolution of social welfare, from the national government to the states, to local governments. Without going through the history of neoliberalism, which scholars from David Harvey to Lisa Duggan have detailed in critical books, it is important to remember that the project of neoliberalism was made more visible first during the Nixon administration and took root under President Reagan. At the heart of Reagan's neoliberal policies and approach was greater market expansion and freedom with a corresponding dissolution of what was formerly known as the safety net. An important point, I think, to make about neoliberalism for this talk, is that its emergence marks the end of the expansionist state that existed during the civil rights movement. Thus, proponents of neoliberalism had to pursue not only a policy agenda but also a set of ideological commitments and rhetorical strategies meant to create and demonize some 'Other.' For example, Reagan's campaign against poor communities included a policy agenda of defunding social service agencies, as well as rhetorical strategies mobilizing tropes like that of the 'welfare queen', meant to demean and distance those on welfare. In order to rationalize the restriction of the social welfare state, that largely benefited white people, there had to be a process of misrepresenting those who benefitted from the social safety net. Toward this end, there was a deployment of tropes such as the 'super predator' that helped to create and solidify an Other that whites, and eventually middle-class people of color, could rally against. These Others were portrayed as being different from our normal. They were abusing and dependent on state support, specifically taxpayer money, suggesting of course, that they themselves were not taxpayers. They were characterized as violent, manipulative, and being engaged in criminal activity. They were accused of being hypersexual, and of course, of having multiple children out of wedlock and uninterested in raising those children. This Other was in need of state surveillance and policing, if the rest of us were to survive their invasion. The invasion of these monsters with strength like Hulk Hogan and who look like demons. It was this process under neoliberalism that fueled what Omi & Winant labeled white resentment politics.

Now, white resentment politics has also been coupled with white fear. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva reminds us that the most segregated lived experience of any group in this country is that of white Americans. Whites are more likely to live among, go to school with, work with, attend church with, marry, have sex with, socialize with, other white people. Thus, the idea of white fear toward an unknown Other is real, facilitated by their segregated lived experience, the mobilization of fearful tropes, and the actual creation of devastated, and I dare say in certain cases, dangerous urban spaces. Under neoliberalism we have witnessed the disinvestment

in poor and urban areas, where living wage, low-skill jobs have become nearly extinct, where the housing stock has become battered and debilitated, where neighborhood schools have been neglected in lieu of charter and magnet schools, and where the middle-class have exited to trying to guarantee their own survival. In their outmigration, William Julius Wilson contends that whites, and then the black middle-class, have left behind those he labels the 'truly disadvantaged', individual inhabiting poor, blighted areas with few recognized resources and even fewer job opportunities. With such devastation and despair, the neoliberal response has been to bracket, isolate and police those dangerous and devastated areas. However, these communities have not only been policed, they've been, of course, *over* policed, using prisons and policing to replace investment and employment. It's important to note that while neoliberalism has been committed to an anti-statism rhetoric and policies, many people forget that there are segments of the state that have actually grown under neoliberalism, such as the policing and prison industrial complex, producing what Beth Richie calls our "prison nation." Ironically, most state investment associated with these neighborhoods were not directed at residents or their living space or areas, but instead policing apparatus to patrol those disposable black bodies created from neoliberalism. The result has been the hiring of more cops, the outfitting of local police departments with military leftovers, the increasing criminalization of behaviors and encounters, the militarizing of our schools, filling them with metal detectors, security guards and city cops, and of course, the proliferation of the school-to-prison pipeline, intent on pushing kids out of school and into the hands of the carceral state.

The conditions of the small suburb of Ferguson, Missouri in many ways are indicative of the neoliberal city or suburb today. For example in 1980, 85% of residents in Ferguson were white; by 2008, 67% of residents were black. Black unemployment is nearly double that of white unemployment. One in four residents live in poverty, with 44% of residents living on less than twice the poverty rate. Moreover, we know that in Ferguson 86% of all police stops were of black motorists, and of those arrested, 93% of those were black. Overall, 85% of all those arrested in Ferguson were black. And all of this was done under the auspices of a police force where only three out of fifty, or 6% of officers, were black. Even beyond the police, the governing apparatus of Ferguson is white dominated, with five of Ferguson's six city council members, the mayor, and six of seven local school board members are all white in a majority black city.

This was the neoliberal context that surrounded Mike Brown and Darren Wilson on that fateful day in Ferguson, Missouri. This was the context in which a white man with a gun and a badge saw a young black man with Hulk Hogan strength paired with his white fear. The story of neoliberalism's impact on urban communities is actually fairly straightforward. However, with the election of Barack Obama, neoliberalism has taken what we might call a 'multicultural turn.'

[sips water – aside: Let me take some water on that.]
[Audience: laughter.]

With the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, we now face a different scenario with regard to the demographics of state power. Specifically, the state is now racialized, not only in terms of its politics of inclusion and exclusion as they are directed toward largely racially marginal populations, but also in terms of its representation at the highest level. This reality means that we must complicate our understanding of state power and neoliberal agendas. Let me be clear, I believe President Obama has shown himself to be not only drawn to neoliberal policies and projects, but is actually a proponent of such a system of government. Whether it is his commitment to markets in the face of their near historic collapse in 2008, or his embrace of privatization in charter schools as ways to address education failure in U.S. public schools, or even his berating of the poor, most often the black people for their seemingly deviant work and parenting practices as reasons for their stalled mobility, President Obama has demonstrated his commitment to a neoliberal approach to governing and to cultural management. However, having President Obama, the first African American president, as the symbolic head of the neoliberal state at this moment has not only meant the promotion of neoliberalism, right, but also more importantly, a variation of neoliberalism that emphasizes a kind of multicultural colorblindness. Colorblind racial ideology, by both decrying racism and designating anti-racism as probably one of the country's newly found core values, actually works to obscure the relationship between identity and privilege. Thus, through colorblind ideology one can claim to be in solidarity with black people while at the same time denigrating the condition of poor black people, faulting them for their behaviors or lack of a work ethic and not their race. Moreover, one could declare that 'black lives matter' while undermining any state-sponsored programs that would address the special needs of poor black people. One could say, in fact, that I'm heartbroken with the death of Trayvon Martin because if I had a son, he would look like Trayvon, and recognize that that means nothing in terms of justice for black people.

So this change in positioning, relative to power across identities, means that we must understand the disjuncture between the neoliberal policy agenda of the Obama administration and the policy needs of the most vulnerable members of black communities. A central component of some of the most effective black political activity have included the mobilization of black people targeting, actually, the state and demanding its active engagement in the expansion of resources and opportunities available to black communities. The neoliberal agenda pursued by Bill Clinton and now Obama is actually one that restrains the work of the state and in many ways stands in opposition to the political commitments and strategies of most in black communities, and has hampered, I would argue, black peoples' ability to voice their agenda and needs for fear of somehow undermining the first black president. It is not, I think, the coincidence that the 2012 mantra in terms of campaigning directed at black communities was that we were all supposed to "have the president's back" -- I guess so he could walk all over ours.

So, I wanted to start this talk with a discussion of neoliberalism and its multicultural turn because it is a reminder of the sustained attack on the basic humanity of poor black people that provides the context in which we should understand the killing of young black people, in particular young black men, and the less visible assaults on black women and the murder of black trans people. If we understand the attack of neoliberalism on poor communities, then we can reckon with the fact that this struggle really is about poor, black people. Those black lives most under duress right now are the lives of poor black people, suffering from the grips of a neoliberal agenda intent on controlling, or if necessary, killing them, often at the hands of the state. And, we should be clear, that poor black lives do not matter in this country and they never have. Moreover, we must be careful not to limit our understanding and outrage about state violence to this one very visible aggressive moment of state violence against black people. We cannot allow anyone to detach the killing of Mike Brown from the neoliberal history that created the context in which he would be evaluated as a monster by a fearful Darren Wilson. No matter how much we vilify and prosecute police officers like Wilson or vigilantes like Zimmerman, these approaches to a limited justice, while appropriate as a first step, do little to challenge the systemic nature of the degradation of black bodies made ever more pernicious under neoliberalism. An understanding of the relationship between neoliberalism and black death means that our target has to be, or at least has to include, the larger system of neoliberalism. If that is the case, then no group can stand in solidarity with this particular moment of resistance while openly and proudly pursuing a neoliberal agenda, not if you truly want to engage in substantive solidarity. And that's the topic of the next section.

[aside: everybody still with me? Audience: yes!]

Performing Solidarity: LGBT Complicity = Black Death

On August 12, 2014, just three days after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a group of LGBT organizations signed a letter in support of the family of Michael Brown. The letter, which is relatively short, reads as follows (and I'll read the entire thing):

“When communities experience fear, harassment and brutality simply because of who they are or how they look, we are failing as a nation. In light of the recent events in Missouri, it is clearer than ever that there is something profoundly wrong in our country.

The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community cannot be silent at this moment, because LGBT people come from all races, creeds, faiths and backgrounds, and because all movements of equality are deeply connected. We are all part of the fabric of this nation and the promise of liberty and justice for all is yet to be fulfilled.

The LGBT community stands with the family of Michael Brown, who was

gunned down in Ferguson, Missouri. We stand with the mothers and fathers of young Black men and women who fear for the safety of their children each time they leave their homes. We call on the national and local media to be responsible and steadfast in their coverage of this story and others like it-- racialized killings that have marred this nation since the beginning of its history. We call on policy makers on all levels of American government not to shrink from action, and we are deeply grateful to Attorney General Eric Holder and the Department of Justice for their immediate commitment to a thorough investigation.

At this moment, we are inspired by the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies ... but the silence of our friends."

All in all, I would argue that this is a powerful letter. By my count, seventy organizations signed on to this letter; organizations that decided to lend their voice ranged from the ACLU, to HRC, to the National Black Justice Coalition, to the Black Youth Project 100 – and I will talk to them about that later. [laughter] [aside: It's alright.]

And, while one might take issue with parts of the letter, that's not my issue this evening. Overall, I found the letter compelling and understand the gesture of solidarity these groups are trying to signal. Many of these organizations and the constituencies they represent are trying to avoid the outrage emanating from LGBT communities of color when nothing is said about critical events in the lives of people of color. Some of these organizations and their constituencies also deeply feel committed to doing what's right. Now, despite good intentions, I have to ask myself can the same organizations that have been at the forefront of their own neoliberal policy goals truly stand in solidarity with the family of Michael Brown, and other young black men and women, or is this an example of what I might call performative solidarity?

The idea that mainstream LGBT organizations have been pushing a neoliberal agenda well-rehearsed argument made much more eloquently and extensively by the likes of Urvashi Vaid and Lisa Duggan, to name but a few. Marriage and the increased dependence on incarceration promoted through hate crimes legislations are but two of policy items promoted by LGBT organizations that leverage a neoliberal approach to politics that often serves to anchor poor black people to the bottom of the racial order.

Let me just say a few words about each of these policy agendas. The quest for marriage equality has been much discussed in light of recent Supreme Court rulings. And while the advance in same-sex marriage both in terms of public opinion and the courts has been celebrated by many, the naysayers of marriage equality on the left have seen their voices muted. Specifically, there are those in lesbian, gay, and queer communities, and I count myself among them, who believe that same-sex marriage only serves to legitimize a process intent on producing a hierarchy of citizenship

and rights bolstered by the institution of marriage. This is a hierarchy that, in fact, is also racially coded. Now, numerous scholars have written about the racialized nature of state policies regulating what are thought to be deviant or non-normative families. Marriage, of course, falls into a category of a racialized state project that is involved in the differential distribution of rights, that disproportionately disadvantages people who are not married, often people of color. Most explicitly, feminist scholars such as Wendy Mink and Ann Marie Smith, have detailed the numerous laws that have been instituted to regulate the sex and intimate relations of women, disproportionately poor women, and women of color, who are not married and who need state assistance. Like heterosexual marriage, same-sex marriage replicates an unequal distribution of rights, with the middle-class who are more likely to marry benefitting while poor and working-class people of color, gay and straight, who are less likely to marry, are subjected to targeted regulation of their sexual, family and intimate formations. Moreover, same-sex marriage – far from ending marriage as we know it – actually preserves, I would argue, a narrow system for the distribution of benefits that is tied to heteronormative understandings of the family. It allows the state to continue to shift its responsibility of providing for the well being of its citizens to some other entity that we label the family.

So, as marriage and two-parent households are normalized and become the dominant discursive framework through which some LGBT communities enter the national consciousness as full citizens, it puts the LGBT community, I believe, at odds demographically at least with trends generally, and in particular, in black communities. For example, the truth of the structure of the black intimate sphere, at least in the U.S., is that nearly 80% of children born to black women under the age of 30 and 70% of all black children were born to women, are born to women who are not married and probably will not marry. Data also indicates that the majority of children did not live in two-parent households. So these details about the black intimate sphere make black people vulnerable to state power. State power that would regulate them not by legal disenfranchisement explicitly on race, but instead that would mobilize a colorblind ideology to minimize their full status as citizens by highlighting their incompatibility with normative expectations of family that are made valid in the quest for same-sex marriage.

I think a similar argument can be made about the use of criminalization and incarceration to protect queer bodies through hate speech legislation. Specifically in the threat posed to LGBTQI individuals in the form of bullying or harassment and physical harm, some mainstream LGBT organizations have pursued a policy agenda that includes tougher hate crime legislation, the introduction of legislation introducing anti-hate-crime legislation on college campuses, and the recognition of cyberbullying as a form of harassment. And while I wouldn't, and I'm sure no one in this room would endorse ignoring the threat to LGBTQI lives, as our lives matter, right, there is something ironic, dangerous and very neoliberal about turning to a system of criminalization to protect the lives of queer folks who are daily threatened and harassed by the same police apparatus in their neighborhood. This is what I

think Audre Lorde meant when she wrote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Thus, we have to ask in the context of the expansion of the prison and policing industrial complex under neoliberalism, what does it mean to utilize the police as protector of gay and lesbian rights? Does it move us any closer to justice or freedom?

The group Gender Just, which used to exist in Chicago, I think most clearly, underlines the problem of dealing with queers in the prison industrial complex. They write, it’s a longer quote, but I’ll read it:

“It is critical to remember that we face violence as youth, as people of color, as people living in poverty, as queers, as trans, as gender non-conforming young people. We can’t separate our identities and any approach to preventing violence much be holistic and incorporate our whole selves.

Our greatest concern is that there is a resounding demand for increased violence as a reaction to violence against queer youth, in the form of hate crime penalties which bolster the prison industrial complex and anti-bullying measures which open the door to zero-tolerance measures and thus reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline.”

Thus, in contrast to many marginalized people of color, the trend among gay leadership seems to be to go for normality: marriage, criminalization, and the military. The cost, of course, of being on the side of normal as scholars such as Dean Spade, Michael Warner, and Lisa Duggan, one more time, have warned is that you must participate in the neoliberal process of excluding and give up the cause of radical transformation. Many of the most visible policy wins of the gay and lesbian agenda are policies and programs that are deeply rooted in, and preserve the structural legitimacy and order of, neoliberalism.

These structural limitations of are very different from what are called for by many in black communities, policies that not only legitimize but also demand a significant shift in state resources. The LGBT domain seems committed to advancing instead a neoliberal agenda of inclusion that comes largely without substantial financial and political commitments on the part of the state, and is fundamentally different from the demand of an active state made by many people of color. It’s actually part of the reason some would say, we’ve seen more of an advancement of an LGBT agenda than we’ve seen of a kind of black liberation agenda.

Thus, my concern with the letter signed by LGBT groups on August 12 in support of the family of Michael Brown is that it is completely disconnected, and I think stands in opposition to, the normalizing neoliberal project that has defined LGBT politics over the last decade or more. The letter represents, I think, a momentary performative solidarity that suggests really a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the systemic threat to black lives. If black lives matter to the LGBT organizations that signed that letter, then it demands a re-thinking of their policy

priorities. It means understanding that pursuing a neoliberal agenda makes us complicit in black death. It means pursuing an analysis and agenda that is not intent to secure rights for *our* group, or *your* group, but is rooted in a politics of liberation of oppressed people where our allies are punks, bulldaggers and welfare queens. Alright, so on to section three and this will be brief.

This is Not the Civil Rights Movement: The Queering of Black Liberation

I want to show you a little clip, because I hope that this is, hopefully our future.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfC_pfsqLqw

Gwen Ifill, PBS Newshour: So, let me ask you this...does this feel different to you? These protests we're seeing, these coast-to-coast rolling die ins, the roadblocks, does this feel like a different stage?

Tory Russell, Hands Up United: Yeah, I mean it's younger, it's fresher. I think we're more connected than most people think. I don't, this is not the civil rights movement, you can tell by how I got a hat on, I got my t-shirt, and how I rock my shoes. This is not the civil rights movement. This is an oppressed peoples' movement. So when you see us, you gonna see some gay folk, you gonna see some queer folk, you gonna see some poor black folk, you gonna see some brown folk, you gonna see some white people and we all out here for the same reasons, we wanna be free. We believe that we have the right *over* laws. The questions we keep getting as to what's legal, we need to be talking about what's right, and we're not heading that way, so we need to go out into the streets and block some of that, and make this, you know, make this system ungovernable, and disrupt it, until we get our own self-determination and our own self-liberation."

[applause]

So, to quote, "this is not the civil rights movement." I love that. The queering of black liberation.

In this last section, I want to briefly – and I really am going to be briefly – explore what it means to give voice to the possibility that there actually can emerge a new, transformative politics.

In 1997 – oh my, so long ago – the journal GLQ published my article, "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics." In the opening pages of the article, I wrote, and I'm gonna quote myself even though it feels a little creepy [laughter] ... I quote, quote [laughter], I wrote, let's just do that,

"I envision a politics where one's relation to power and not some homogenized identity is privileged in determining one's political comrades.

I'm talking about a politics where the non-normative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative political work. Thus, if there is any truly radical political potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin." End quote.

Now, since the publication of that article, I have been searching, and people have been asking, about the politics I wrote about. And, generally over the years, sadly, there have been few opportunities to believe that we had created a space where transformational work could begin. Sadly and ironically, it is actually resistance to black death at the hands of the police, resistance generated by the lack of a legitimate legal response to the murder of Michael Brown and Eric Garner most recently, that I think raises the possibility of a reimagined, transformational politics that maybe we call queer and maybe we don't, but it is a transformational moment that has the potential to move beyond marriage and neoliberal homonormativity, centering our resistance around individuals like Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Marissa Alexander.

I should note that it is usually a much easier leap for those of us thinking and writing about death and violence and race and queerness, or at least queer politics, to marshal a different black body, to mark this intersection. Individuals like CeCe McDonald, an African American trans woman who went to jail for second degree manslaughter as a result of defending herself from a racist and transphobic attacker, I think are more traditional objects of our analysis and support. In many ways, I think CeCe fits our understanding of who can be the face of queer politics, even a radical queer politics. A more traditional queer politics – *traditional queer* politics – might be more comfortable incorporating the killing of Sakia Gunn, the young black lesbian who was killed in Newark, New Jersey after rejecting the sexual advances of her killer. We might be more comfortable in our analyses of queer politics by focusing on Sakia Gunn than focusing on someone like Michael Brown. But as I've said about other young black, in particular men, who have been killed, and I'll say it now about Michael Brown, for me Michael Brown's death is deeply connected to the killing of Sakia Gunn and the attack on and incarceration of CeCe McDonald, not because of his sexual practice or his identity, or his performance, but instead because Michael Brown, CeCe McDonald and Sakia Gunn, as well as other young folks of color, operate in the world as queer subjects. The targets of normalizing racializing projects intent on pathologizing them across the dimensions of race, class, gender, and sexuality while normalizing their degradation and marginalization until it becomes what we expect, the norm, until it becomes something we no longer see, or pay attention to.

This sentiment is underscored in another letter. On December 4, a number of New York-based progressive and people of color queer organizations issued their own statement or letter. The organizations that signed on to this letter were FIERCE,

Audre Lorde Project, AVP, Griot Circle, Streetwise and Safe, and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

[applause]

[aside: That's right, want to end this on an up note.]

The authors' start the letter by listing the names of those "lost to police brutality, those lost to communal violence justified by the policing of our bodies, and those falsely accused, detained and abused." Those listed include Eleanor Bumpers to Amadou Diallo to Eric Garner to Renita Hill and Patrice Johnson of the New Jersey 4. In no way is this a cohesive group of LGBT individuals, but they all are queer subjects in the most expansive and progressive sense of the idea. It is in the heart of the letter that the signatories make clear their vision of the movement. They write, (<http://www.fiercencyc.org/releases/wake-rise>) and again I quote:

"We are clear as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans and Gender Non Conforming People of Color that our safety is contingent on the preservation of all Black and People of Color bodies. We have been righteous in fighting against anti-Black racism & anti-immigrant oppression, that allows for state controlled white supremacy to exist and justify the murder of our people. The murders of Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Akai Gurley and Eric Garner prove that Black lives are seen as dangerous and expendable. For those of us that are Queer, Trans, Black and People of Color, our bodies, our gender expression and who we love puts us further away from the "norms" and has falsely perceived us as the most threatening, less than human, and even more dangerous of all bodies.

These organizations end their statement asking, "In this moment, what are we willing to do to be free?" Across the country people, I think, have been answering this seemingly simple yet complicated question by putting their bodies on the line to remind those with power that in fact, yes, black lives matter. As Tory Russell, from Hands Up United, reminds us, this is not the civil rights movement. It also isn't the Stonewall rebellion, or the feminist movement. This is a new configuration of resistance and struggle that is working to make a space where yes, transformational work can begin. I have had the honor of working closely with the BYP100 – probably not closely enough since they signed that other letter, but that's alright [laughter] we work together, they lead themselves. Anyway, I've had the honor of working closely with the BYP100, a group of young, black activists between the ages of 15 and 35. They represent, I think, the best of what this moment promises. They are young organizers who embrace, as they say, a black feminist and queer analysis, independent of who their intimate and sexual partners are. For them, being queer is both an identity and a position relative to oppressive state power, a position that is routinely inhabited by young people of color. The BYP is also an organization that declares itself to be unapologetically black and insists on radical black leadership at this moment. This is a group of young people that understands the governing process, and have developed their own policy agenda, the agenda to keep us safe -

you can find it online at [BYP100 dot org](http://BYP100.org) - but even while they engage in policy debates, they understand the limits of trusting the neoliberal state to secure their freedom or their safety. So, for example, while they support the use of body cameras on police as a policy initiative, they also remind us that video footage didn't stop the murder of Oscar Grant or Eric Garner. The BYP100, I often say, they have their finger on policy but their minds on freedom. They close their meetings chanting Assata Shakur's directive, "It is our duty to fight, it is our duty to win, we must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."

The BYP100 is but one organization that is part of a kind of new liberatory movement developing, not just across the country but across the world. A movement made up, as Tory Russell described, made up of some gays, some queer folk, some poor black people, some brown folks, some white folks, some feminists – oh, wait, he didn't say feminists, but I know he meant to – but all of them united in their position as oppressed people, aka politically queer, and all fighting for freedom, not marriage, not increased criminalization, not access to the military, but for freedom. Thus, I have watched in awe and stood in deference and tried to enact a substantive solidarity where I and the people around me put our privilege on the line for the increasing numbers of young people taking to the streets across the world engaging in an intersectional and queer politics of resistance. And, as I've said before, some of these young people are our students, who have taken what they've learned in our classes and transformed our theories, books and projects turned them into campaigns that actually impact lives. Others are being pulled by their own experience where they know that their life and happiness is tenuous at best under the system of neoliberalism that rules the land, even though they don't call it neoliberalism. Still others whose identities do not mark them as disposable, we might in some cases call them white allies, are engaging in radical resistance because it is the right thing to do. It is their form of substantive solidarity work. And, in organizations like the BYP100, FIERCE, ALP, Hands Up United, We Charge Genocide activists are building a politic, both analysis and action, that makes visible the transformative potential of queering black liberation.

Now, I might be wrong – it's hard to believe, but I have been wrong before – but I believe that this is an incredible moment in the movement to make black lives actually matter. So, to the LGBT movement or organizations, and hopefully they're different, I would ask that, instead of a move toward normality, we consider an embrace of deviance (another topic that I'm fond of).

[applause]

We might build on the tradition of those who challenged the police at the Stonewall riots, or AIDS activists, many of them in the room, I was here with people, who challenged the government when it denied the right for us to live, or trans activists who are changing laws, language and how we understand ourselves, even as their very lives are being threatened. In the resilience and resistance of less traditional queer bodies and communities, there are in fact models of how LGBT organizations

might stand in substantive solidarity demonstrating truthfully that black lives matter. At the very least, we can use our privilege and homonormative power to create spaces where the radical imagination of activists can be unleashed. We must seize this opportunity to move beyond marriage, the military and incarceration to envision and work toward a radical queer politics, led by youth of color, because their lives actually represent the place of what is possible. If we do that, we should remember that we actually have nothing to lose but our chains.

Thank you very much.