NECESSARY DISIDENTIFICATIONS: QUEER STUDENTS OF COLOR

IN DISCOURSES OF INTERSECTIONS AND ASSEMBLAGES

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

Thinking through queer of color critique, this work explores current debates about intersectionality specifically focusing on how theories of intersectionality impact lived experiences of queer students of color. Utilizing vignettes and personal reflections on dialogues carried out by a university Queer Students of Color group, this thesis demonstrates the complexities uncovered when queer of color subjectivity is thought with intersectionality, assemblages and disidentification. The theoretical and lived tensions of "queerness" raise problematics but also possibilities. The thesis concludes with a discussion of queer possibilities and futurities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

...give name to the nameless so it can be thought.
-Audre Lorde

We had decided to meet on Saturdays for brunch because it gave us an excuse to eat and cook together. Within the realm of mainstream perceptions of "gayness", we fulfill some stereotypes: our attire was too fashionable for a morning brunch, a big portion of the gathering was dominated by gossip concerning people's "boo thing", and of course, we had mimosas in wine glasses. It is difficult for people of color to deny that the kitchen is often a magical and creative place for us. In this case, by the end of brunch, our fashionable morning attire reeked of garlic fried rice, while an altar blessed us with the smoke of sage dancing between us as we all shared stories of our parents cooking. This is where the flamboyant fingers of some of the boys met with old and familiar combinations of spices, and where girls dance Cumbia together. It was normal and weird, forbidden and comfortable, it was gay and it was "ethnic." I thought to myself, this is what being queer of color looks like.

We were meeting to discuss what we, as queer students of color, wanted from administration at the University. In our 3-hour brunch, we discussed various topics, from the importance of having diversity trainings and more faculty of color on campus, to the ways that we have been excluded from having access to resources other student organizations have. Most importantly, we imagined how the University would change if we had data on what the campus climate for LGBTQIAA/queer students looks like. We

ended the meeting with a list of talking points we wished to present to administration during our meeting to discuss issues of diversity. Before leaving, we shared our final thoughts and feelings: as students of color we are nothing but numbers to administration, but as queer, we are invisible.

Fall 2015 was critical in students' attempt to bring forth issues of diversity to school administration. Racial tensions at various universities like Yale, UCLA, the University of Michigan, the University of Oklahoma, and Arizona State, ignited protest around college campuses, with social media outlets intensifying students' message (The New York Times, 2015). However, it was only after a series of events at Missouri State where the massive demonstration by Black students resulted in the resignation of the University's President and Chancellor, that administrations at other institutions decided to be proactive about issues of diversity. Among those was the University of Utah.

On Friday, November 20th the President's Office at the University of Utah hosted an open forum to discuss issues of diversity within the institution. The "March Against Racism," as titled by the President's Office in an email to all those affiliated with the University, began with exactly what it described: a march from the President's office to the student union building, where the forum was held. Led by President Pershing, who was accompanied by the vice president for equity and diversity, more than 500 University students, staff and faculty joined together in chants of solidarity and justice. However, what seemed as the University's attempt to stand in solidarity with the Black community and other communities of color, was read by many ethnic student organizations as an attempt to keep racial tensions under control. As President Pershing and others arrived to the student union, the Black Student Union (BSU), el Movimiento Estudiantil Chican@

de Aztlan (MEChA), the Asian American Student Association (AASA), the Pacific Islander Student Association (PISA), and other "ethnic" student groups met the University's president with signs and tape over their mouths to signify the silencing of students of color. Student leaders of the Black Student Union presented a list of 13 demands, which included more scholarships and facilities for students of color, racial sensitivity training for staff, and additional recruitment and retention of Black and other faculty of color. Native American students described the insensitivity of a Ute mascot and having buildings sponsored by companies who damage the environment.

Although this event only captured the attention of local media outlets, the dialogue between students and administration, as well as the 13 demands presented by students, was a key moment for the relationship between students of color and the University's administration. As consumers of education and products of the institution, students of color not only play an integral part in the sustainability of the institution, but also provide distinct standpoints, perspectives, and interventions in the way that diversity and inherently identity-based issues are conceptualized in higher education. For many minoritized communities—whether Black, Latino, other people of color, and LGBTQIA— identity politics have been a source of strength, community and academic development. However, the embrace of identity-based politics within social justice movements has historically had tensions with the mainstream conceptualization of what social justice is. In other words, while race, gender, and other identity categories have been used as spaces to identify where social powers and structures work to exclude those who are "different," mainstream social justice frameworks believe that we should work towards equality for everyone and essentially empty such social categories (Crenshaw,

1991). As Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote in 1991:

> The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences… effort to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. (p. 1242)

Thus, this problematic begs the question, how does a discussion about diversity in Universities let us theorize differently about identities, multiple grounds of identity, their relationality to each other, and most importantly, their intersectionality?

This thesis explores the current debates about intersectionality by asking the following questions: How is intersectionality being rethought, and how do queer students of color inform discourse of intersectionalities? What I hope the outcome of this thesis to be is the realization that if we do not maintain "queer of color" in conversation with new debates of intersectionality, we miss an opportunity to theorize about intersectionality differently. I put experiences of queer of color next to discourses of diversity within Universities because I believe this allows a space to analyze how universities and students conceptualize and enact intersectionalities. In other words, the discussions at various universities around the country are my "playing ground" to work through the limitations of intersectionality as an analytical tool to help us understand the experiences of queer students of color.

For nearly three decades, since the publication of the groundbreaking article *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracists Politics* by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the term intersectionality has given rise to a series of academic debates in regards to the meaning of the term, the scope of its genealogy, and its capacity as a

political framework (Cooper, 2015). Intersectionality emerged as an analytical frame use to speak to the positionality of black women and other women of color both in the civil rights movement and civil rights law. However, Robyn Wiegman (as cited in Cooper, 2015) claims that the term has taken on a kind of "citation ubiquity", giving the sense that "everyone [in the academy] does intersectional work". Thus, there seems to be less agreement about what intersectionality really is and a growing argument that despite its extensive academic influence, the framework asserts certain limitations and insufficiently attends to a range of critical questions (Cooper, 2015).

In recent years, a dynamic body of work proclaiming Crenshaw's original intention with intersectionality has emerged in academia. Theoretical interventions like Jasbir Puar's (2007, 2012) assemblages and José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) disidentifications provide a point of reconciliation between the power dynamics Crenshaw interrogates and the identity-based adoption of intersectionality. Thinking through a queer of color critique, described by Roderick Ferguson (2004) as "interrogation of social formations at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals of practices" (p. 149), and putting these interventions in conversation with each other, renders visible what is at stake in debates of intersectionality and how these theories impact lived experiences of queer students of color in higher education.

Utilizing my own personal reflection and narratives from dialogues carried out by the Queer Students of Color group (QSOC) at the University of Utah, I engage a rereading of intersectionality. This analysis attends to the particular forms of subjugation and subordination that characterize the experiences of minoritized students who identify

as queer and of color.

I begin this journey with a genealogy of intersectionality. Starting with an analysis of Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, presenting not only her framework but also exploring critiques that point to its limitation, which sets the foundation for understanding intersectionality. This discussion is followed by an introduction to contemporary theoretical interventions of intersectionality with a primary focus on two key theoretical frameworks: assemblages and disidentification. I then attempt to situate queer students of color within these dialogues, via two vignettes, to explore the ways that queer students of color disrupt and perpetuate ideas of intersection through their experience with the discourse of diversity in higher education. The thesis concludes with a third vignette, an intersection of imagination, future and liberation thought where, with the help of Afrofuturisms, we can situate possibilities to theorize and employ speculative futures with flexible intersections.

2. THE UBIQUITY OF QUEER STUDENTS OF COLOR

The growing dissatisfaction with monological theoretical and methodological approaches to subjectivities has motivated some of the most powerful literary works from women of color, like those of Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and The Combahee River Collective. This in turn has sparked dynamic scholarship in a variety of disciplines (Soto, 2007) and fueled some of the most profound student activist movement, like those speared headed by Undocuqueer[1] students. The most sustainable result of this work has been the consciousness and deep understanding of what Sandra K. Soto challenges by asking:

> …if the identification of gender as the primary variable for investigating sexual identity forecloses a consideration of the equally meaningful place of racial formation and class relations in our 'sexual' lives, then the acceptance of race and ethnicity as the defining characteristics of people of color prevents an adequate examination of the significant roles that sexual desires and sexual prohibitions play in racialization. (Soto, 2007 p. 1)

As a result, many research scholars and activist have gained the tools necessary to demonstrate that race and sexuality are not self-contained nor discrete categories. This text stays with that certainty, especially when analyzing the experiences of myself and other queer students of color in our desire to obtain recognition by institutions of higher learning. This brings me to the definition of queer of color. As self-defined as this conjunction may seem, I cannot begin to express what its expansiveness has meant for me as a student, a scholar, and an individual. For this work, I look to Cherri Moraga

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[1] Term used to identify those who are undocumented and queer

(1993) and Roderick Ferguson (2004) to help me contextualize a definition that captures

the complexity of this term, yet situates it in a specific reality. In *Toward a Queer of*

Color Critique Aberrations in Black, Ferguson writes:

> The preceding paragraphs suggest that African American culture indexes a social heterogeneity that oversteps the boundaries of gender propriety and sexual normativity. That social heterogeneity also indexes formations that are seemingly outside the spatial and temporal counts of African American culture. These arguments oblige us to ask what mode of analysis would be appropriate for interpreting the drag-queen prostitute as an image that allegorizes and symbolizes that social heterogeneity, a heterogeneity that associates African American culture within gender and sexual variation and critically locates that culture within the genealogy of the West. (Ferguson, 2007, p. 2)

Similarly, in *Queer Aztlan*, Cherrie Moraga (1993) writes that:

> Chicana lesbians and gay men do not merely seek inclusion in the Chicano nation; we seek a nation strong enough to embrace a full range of racial diversities, human sexualities, and expression of gender. We seek a culture that can allow the natural expression of our femaleness and maleness and or love without prejudice of punishment. In "queer" Aztlan, there would be no freaks, no "others" no one to point one's fingers at." (Moraga, 1993, p. 235)

With the help of Ferguson and Moraga, I define queer of color as more than a

point of encounter of an ethnic and sexual identity, but a space of politic disruption. By

this, I suggest that queer of color offers more than just a space to theorize from the

cohabitation of both race and sexuality, but serve as an approach to culture as a site that

compels identification with an adversary to the normative ideals promoted by state and

capital (Ferguson, 2004). I want to employ that to be queer of color is different than

LGBTQIAA of color because our ontology, as queer, suggests ideas past inclusivity and

moves toward fluidity. In other words, to be queer of color does not imply a static

identity with one of the LGBTQIAA subjectivities, but rather moves within the

LGBTQIAA alphabet [2] and the diasporic nature of our ethnic formulations. As queer of color people, we seek to move past a checklist of identities and instead look for a deep understanding of a multiplicity of identities. Moreover, queer of color offers more than just a hybridity or a contradiction. Queer of color is an epistemic standpoint of revolutionary subjectivity that results from understanding the world through our fluidity. By revolutionary subjectivity, I deploy the potential that this subjectivity has in transforming mainstream ideology, as also noted by Ferguson. Queer of color is about the potential to "queer", to question and complicate all forms of hegemonic relations, including those that occur across gender, race, sexuality. This then has a radical potential to disrupt how we think about knowledge but also how we organize ourselves in relations, institutions, and family.

For this specific work, queer students of color is used to described students who coexist between, amongst, and at the same time in two student groups with a long history of social activism; our mother ethnic organizations (Black Student Union, MEChA, Pacific Islander Student Association and Asian American Student Association) as well as our queer organization. The goal of this thesis is to understand how queer students of color and institutions of higher learning make sense of a queer of color subjectivity, as we attempt to move this term from a celebration of hybridity so unnatural that it seems to only exist in the realm of fantasy, to a form of authenticity.

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[2] The "alphabet" is a reference to many of the letters used to denote an identity within the LGBTQIAA community. For example, "L" is for Lesbian, and "G" for Gay.

2.1 Kimberlé Crenshaw and Intersectionality

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in a pair of essays published in 1989 and 1991, intersectionality emerged as an analytic framework capable of attending to the subjectivity of Black women, primarily in civil rights law. Crenshaw chooses the classic anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of Us are Brave*, as a point of departure in efforts to develop a black feminist critique to the "consequences of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experiences and analysis" (Crenshaw,1989, p. 57). Intersectionality thus became one of the biggest contributions of black feminisms and critical social thought.

In *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimation Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Crenshaw (1989) brings forth the problems with a "single-axis" approach to the multidimensionality of Black women experiences. This "single-axis" framework, she argues, "erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of other-wise privileged members of the group" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 57). To help us understand how she views intersectionality, she writes:

> I seem to be saying that in one case, Black women's claims were rejected and their experiences obscured because the court refused to acknowledge that the employment experience of Black women can be distinct from that of white women, while in other cases, the interests of Black women are harmed because Black women's claims were viewed as so distinct from the claims of either white women or Black men that the court denied to Black females representation of the larger class. It seems that I have to say that black women are the same and harmed by being treated differently or that they are different and harmed by being treated the same. But I cannot say both. This apparent contradiction is but another manifestation of the conceptual limitations of the single-issue analysis that intersectionality challenges. The point is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of way and that the contraction arises from our

assumption that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 63)

Crenshaw concludes her article with a call for intersectional theory by asking race theories to include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy, and for feminists to include an analysis of race as a means to express subjectivities of women of color. While intersection has been taken up as a means of identity politics by both academics and activist, Crenshaw introduces the framework not as identity politics, but rather as a means to explain how systems of power work to maintain the subjugation of Black women. I claim that this is the same factor operating in everyday representation of queer students of color.

In 1991, with *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color,* Crenshaw expanded on intersectionality to include other women of color besides Black women, and directly address the term's relationship to social construction list ideas about identity and cultural battles over identity politics. She writes:

> In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimension of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups, and other problems of identity politics bears on efforts to politicize violence against women… And so, when the practices expound identity as women or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242)

She goes on to say that intersectionality should not be taken as new and totalizing theory of identity but, rather, intersectionality demonstrates "the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). Thus, it is very evident that Crenshaw's argument is based

on the failure to begin with an intersectional framework, and the failure to do so results in insufficient attention to the experiences of subordination of women of color. She did not argue that intersectionality would fully account for the range of depth of Black female experiences, but instead that intersection provides a paradigm for understanding the effects of mutually constructed systems of powers (Cooper, 2015).

While the commonly thought diagram of intersectionality has become the point where multiple identities cross as in Figure 1, I would argue that Crenshaw alludes more to a visual where vector forces simultaneously "attack" a subject as in Figure 2.

I use intersectionality as a starting point for my work because it is the term most widely used to described the experiences of queer folks of color and because the current debates and concerns regarding the scope of the framework allow for a discussion and analysis of queer youth of color positionality and relationship to notions of diversity in higher education. Moving from and through a queer of color subjectivity allows us to engage in a dialogue that helps us understand how intersectionality is "practiced". Thus, I argue that for QSOC[3], intersectionality has been the tool used to attempt to bridge educational policy and student subjectivities. Having said that, it is important to also present the critiques of intersectionality within this work because they serve as a platform for upcoming discussions. Among the critiques of intersectionality is a lack of a clearly defined intersectional methodology and definition of the term, the use of Black women as the token intersectional subjects, and the coherent connection between intersectionality theory and lived experiences of multiple identities (Nash, 2008). For some, intersectionality is assessed as failing to account for identity issues from the view that its

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[3] See page 5 for reference.

goal is to subvert race-gender binaries in service of theorizing identity in a more complex

fashion (Cooper, 2015). Given that our primary ways of knowing are influenced by who

we are or how we are socialized, intersectionality also accounts for an epistemological

system. This is where I invite a disruption, alternatives and expansions to

intersectionality, as a means to invoke spaces where we can put side by side queer of

color episteme and interactions of power.

2.2 Assemblages

In "I would rather be a cyborg that a goddess," Jasbir Puar (2012) outlines the

genealogy of intersectionality; from Crenshaw's initial intent to its most cotemporary use

arguing that

> …what the method of intersectionality is most predominantly used to qualify, is the specific difference of women of color, a category that has now become, I would argue, simultaneously emptied of specific meaning in its ubiquitous application and yet overdetermined in its deployment. In this usage, intersectionality always produces an Other, and that Other is always Women of Color...who must invariably show to be resistant, subversive and articulating a grievance. (Puar, 2012, p. 52)

In other words, Puar claims that the othering of women of color through a

framework that was meant to alleviate precisely that, has been taken as the primary

means from which subjectivities of non-White women are theorized. This, in turn,

according to Puar, perpetuates White feminisms. I push Puar further to argue, that this

redirection of the intersectionality framework not only perpetuates White feminisms, but

also other liberal frameworks. To make her claim clear, Puar writes:

> My own reliance upon and calls to intersectional approaches notwithstanding, the limitations of feminist and queer (and queer of color) theories of intersectionality are indebted in one sense to the taken-for-granted presence of the subject and its permutations of content and form, rather than an investigation of the predominance of subjecthood itself. Thus despite the anti-identitarian critique that

queer theory launches (i.e. queerness is an approach, not an identity or wedded to identity), the queer subject, a subject that is against identity, transgressive rather than (gay or lesbian) laboratory, nevertheless surface as an object in need of excavation, elaboration, or specularization. (Puar, 2007, p. 206)

It is with this critique of intersectionality that I engage queer students of color and where I want to practice using assemblages. Thus, I also want to engage with some of the questions that Puar asks: What does an intersectionality critique look like, but more importantly what does it do in an age of neoliberalism where educational institutions strive to accommodate all kinds of differences? Has intersectionality become an excuse for the (re)centering of White liberal feminist thought, and does that centering account for the lack of consideration of a queer of color subjectivity in discourse of diversity in higher education? These questions I attempt to answer when I pair intersectionality and assemblages with the vignettes.

In an attempt to define assemblages, Jasbir Puar and Alexander Weheliye (2015) Attend to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's work. Both Puar and Weheliye argue assemblages to "constitute continuously shifting relational totalities comprised of spasmodic networks between different entities (content) and their articulation within 'acts and statement' (expression)" (Weheliye, 2015, p. 46). In "Feminist technological futures: Deleuze and body/technology assemblages," Dianne Currier (2003) writes that "assemblage marks the following shifts: a refusal of identity or unity as ground or ordering logic; a shift in the relation between the parts and the whole and a focus on the *movements* [emphasize added] of linkage and connection" (Currier, 2003, p. 325). Furthermore, Currier argues that in "each assemblage the particles, intensities, forces and flows of components meet with and link with the forces and flows of the other components: the resultant distribution of these meetings constitutes the assemblage"

(Currier 2003, p. 325). With the help of these theorists, I constitute an assemblage as the pushback to the grid-like visual of intersectionality and agree with Puar when she states that "Subject positioning on grid is never self-conceding; positioning does not precede movement but rather it is induced by it; the complexity of process is continuously mistaken for a resultant product" (Puar, 2012, p. 50). To further explain this, I want to go back to Kimberlé Crenshaw's legendary example of the traffic light where she provides the following example:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like the traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. …But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. In these cases the tendency seems to be that no driver is held responsible, no treatment is administered, and the involved parties simply get back in their cars and zoom away. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 63)

However, in contrast to the example of the traffic light, I read an assemblage to be more like a water molecule whose bonds between oxygen and hydrogen shift when going through evaporation, precipitation, condensation, sublimation, deposition, freezing, melting, and engaging with network of other molecules, depending on its environment. Following this train of thought, for this work I take assemblages to be a focus on the patterns of relations, not the entities, but the arrangement within subjectivities, how they are arranged with each other and what moves, when, and how, as in Figure 3. In essence, I am interested to see what a molecule of identities does differently than an intersection of identities. Much like Puar cites Rey Chow in her work by saying "race and sex are for the most part not only indistinguishable and undifferentiable from each other, but are a series of temporal and spatial contingencies that retain a stubborn aversion to being read,"

(Puar, 2007, p. 206) I want to investigate how, at certain times, queer students of color engage in an interpretation and performance of queerness that is an assemblage temporally contingent upon its interaction.

2.3 Disidentification

Because the critiques of intersectionality are centered on the theory's capacity to speculate about identity, and as an attempt to maintain queer of color in play with the ways that intersectionality is being rethought, I turn to José Esteban Muñoz and his work on disidentification as a way to conceptualize identify formation and intersectionality "of subjects whose identities are formed as a response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny…" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 6).

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* José Esteban Muñoz (1999) looks at how "minoritarian subjects" function by not aligning themselves with or against exclusionary works but rather by transforming these works for their own cultural purposes. Muñoz starts his works with a critical dialogue on identity formations, stating that his work is "informed by the belief that the value of any narrative of identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of self is especially exhausted and no longer of much use" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5). He dialogues with political theorist William E Connolly, who understands identity to be a site of struggle where fixed complexions clash against socially constituted definitions or identitarian perceptions, and uses that framework as a solution to the essentialism versus antiessentialism debate that surround stories of self-formation.

For Muñoz, formulations of identity are produced at the point of contact between

essential understanding of self and socially constructed narratives of self, thus Muñoz

attempts to "chart the ways in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must

work/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates" (p. 12). In

other words, Muñoz is considering those who must negotiate between a fixed identity

disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for these subjects. This is

where Muñoz engages with the basic argument of intersection:

> The essentialized understanding of identity (i.e. men are like this, Latinas are like that, queer are that way) by its very nature must reduce identities to lowest-common-denominator terms. There is an essential blackness, for example, in various strains of black nationalist thinking and it is decidedly heterosexual. Socially encoded scripts of identity are often formatted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender and various other identifactory distinctions. Following Connolly's lead, I understand the labor (and it is often, if not always *work*) of making identity as a process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives that some critics and theorist have understood as a essentialist and constructivist. This collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable ways. The version of identity politics that this book participates in imagines a reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely at the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit. (Muñoz, 1999, p. 6)

While Crenshaw's framework is meant to offer a way of making sense of power

dynamics and assemblages and may give us a way of understanding the fluidity of

identities, Muñoz perhaps gives us a way to understand the way that identity politics can

be used to break down systemic barriers. I like to take the following quote and Figure 4 to

demonstrate what Muñoz writes:

> To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one makes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identifactory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of

the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations. (Muñoz, 1999, p. 12)

Disidentification is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarain politics that is not monocasual or monothematic, one that is calibrated on a multiplicity of interlocking identities. I am compelled by disidentifications as a way to understand the reaction of queer students of color to systems of oppression within the institution, and as a way to make sense of students' agency within this sphere. It is important to note that Muñoz also writes that

> At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on others occasions queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some, disidentification is a survival strategy that works *within and outside the dominant public spheres simultaneously*. (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5, emphasis mine)

This probes my thinking to ask: How do we make sense of Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality when subjects choose to disidentify? I also revisit this question in the vignettes.

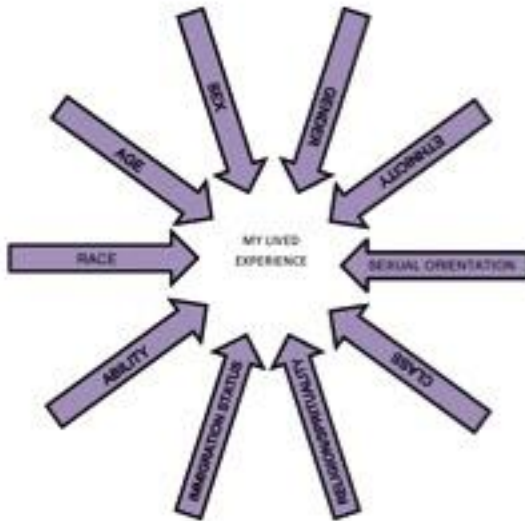Figure 1 Widely conceptualized visual of intersectionality.

Figure 2 Vector visual of intersectionality.

Figure 3 Visual exemplifying an interpretation of an assemblage.

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Figure 4 Visual of José Esteban Muñoz's disidentification.

3. COOKING WITH THEORY

Some of my favorite memories revolve around the kitchen table. Every morning my mom would wake up at five in the morning to make us atole,[4] to eat with a piece of toast. When we came home from school, we would change out of our school uniform, set the table, and once my dad was home, all four of us would eat together and share any new adventures we partook in during the day. Weekends were no different.

It took a long time for me to understand why my mom made Mexican food even though she was not Mexican. The fact that we ate rice tacos, because we always had tortilla and rice, did not seem strange to me. However, the fact that an Ecuadorean woman could play with Mexican spices with such ease as my mom did always mesmerized me. I remember asking her why she cooked more Mexican food than Ecuadorean, her response was that she had gained a new appreciation for Mexican culture after marrying my dad. I do not think she had a newfound appreciation for Mexican culture, but rather that for her the best way to show appreciation for my dad was to cook Mexican food. Regardless, it seemed that around the kitchen table, every single aspect of our being meshed together. In the kitchen we were both Ecuadorian and Mexican, daughters and sisters, wife and mother, father and husband, American, people of color, queer, transborder travelers, all at once, individually, in relation to each other… just like the food on our plate.

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[4] Mexican corn-based drink usually consumed for breakfast. Word spelled in Spanish.

I believe this was the beginning of my own obsession with identities and their multiplicities. The intimacy my family shared in the kitchen was always a safe haven for me, mostly because that was the time of the day where who and what we were was not questioned. Our time in the kitchen was a visual representation of the multiplicity of our own identities coming together in one place, at a certain given time, as individuals coexisting with one another. However, this was also the beginning of me wondering where within the American popular culture and its social organization I would fit; why the classic American lifestyle depicted in movies was not my reality, and what my family dinners as a queer Latina would look like. Perhaps this is the reason why Sunday Brunch with QSOC at someone's house seemed like a no-brainer.

Throughout this thesis I use the vignettes to try to comprehend how queer students of color engaged with discourses of intersectionality. The opening vignette in the introduction to this thesis serves itself as an introduction to how queer students of color at the University of Utah conceptualized their positionality within the institution-- as invisible. There, I attempt to set the stage to the social political school climate from which I am theorizing. The next two vignettes are written in a voice that combines academic and social English to present discourses about the way that both queer students of color and administration play with the concept of race and sexuality, either in the way that it is performed or the way that they are perceived, in order to make sense of intersections. I chose to do vignettes because I felt it was the best way to attempt to present a realistic and unobjective brief and evocative description of the experience of queer students of color. Though I understand that there are other methods which take on storytelling and narratives, I do not feel I know enough about those methods to do them

justice.

It is also important to note that although several QSOC members were present during the development and manifestation of these vignettes, I use these stories and accounts to complement my own perspective. Secondly, it is also important to understand that through this vignettes I do not attempt to demonstrate or prove that any certain theory or theoretical framework works best to conceptualize intersectionalities, but rather, I take this as an opportunity to see what happens when we pair these current debates about intersectionality with the lived experiences of queer students of color, and thus expose what we may be missing if we do not maintain queer of color in play with these new debates. Having said that, what follows is an attempt to pair the previously discussed theoretical frameworks with the vignettes to see what these theories help us uncover about the subjectivity of queer students of color and vise a versa.

3.1 Seeking Visibility at the Bottom of the Building

They had scheduled our meeting in the afternoon. I remember thinking that they were very accommodating, and that they were serious about the meeting, mostly because they made sure to have it at time none of us had class. We were meeting at the very bottom of the building. I do not think I have ever seen a first floor look so much like a basement. There were pipes running along the ceiling, the carpet was dirty and it did not seem like there were many rooms on that floor. I started wondering if they had chosen that room because they wanted to respect those who were not out, or because they could not find a better place to meet. After all, they had changed the location twice.

We were meeting with administration from the University, three important gatekeepers of diversity. Two weeks before this meeting, one of the admins had

presented 13 resolutions in response to the demands from the diversity rally. This administrator had been sharing the demands to all the student groups who were part of the rally, in other words, the "ethnic" and minoritized student groups. According to the University's administration, they wanted to get a "stamp of approval" from the students present at the rally on the resolution that they had developed.

When the resolutions were first presented to QSOC, at a previous meeting that took place about a month before the specific meeting described in this vignette, we were impressed by administration's willingness to meet students' needs and requests. However, even though there was push from administration to hire more diverse faculty, create a student diversity council, and create a streamline for scholarships for Native American Students, nothing on the list of resolutions related to queer students, much less queer students of color. For that reason, we questioned why they wanted to meet with us. Later we found out that administration learned of our existence by coincidence while presenting to another group, and felt it necessary to also touch bases with us. The irony.

This second meeting started like most student groups start their meeting: Everyone introduced themselves, stated their preferred gender pronouns and their involvement with the university. Administration started by summarizing our previous meeting, thanked us for giving them an overview of the organization, its history, our struggles with sustainability and sharing relationship to other "ethnic" groups. They continued by telling us that their next steps after our first initial meeting was a meeting with the admins on campus that could answer to QSOC's unique demands and needs. These demands could be summarized as:

1. Institutional acknowledgement and recognition.

2. A streamline of funding for sustainability and to be able to program like other groups on campus.

3. The hiring of an advisor that identifies and embodies a queer of color subjectivity.

We were all excited and nervous to see what administration thought could "resolve" the unique struggles to QSOC. Though they offered to meet every demand we had made, I was especially intrigued by the way they phrased the justification to give institutional support to QSOC. I think it's fair to say that when administration says things like "we have to think what would it mean to fund this group...this is critically important for *our* future, there is great growth potential…why would we want to wait, why not lead what campuses can do with student groups like *you*, if we wait we are not leading we are following..." it's hard not to raise an eyebrow.

Needless to say, they established a streamline of funding for QSOC of the same amount that the other ethnic student groups received from the institution. Recognition from the institution was implied with the funding we received, and the money was expected to be used for programming, whatever that meant for QSOC. Our third demand, the establishment of an advisor for QSOC, turned out to be somewhat more complicated.

For us, the role of the advisor is critical. Here we asked the institution to hire someone who can advocate for queer students of color and navigate spaces that, as students, we do not necessarily have access to. We made the argument that we need an advisor who embodies a queer and of color subjectivity and that their presence as an admin could help address issues of diversity that are not necessarily on the radar of current administrators. Furthermore, the advisor could help maintain the sustainability of the group. Though the administration agreed that that we could benefit from having an

advisor, the admins also expressed the need to find a space where, in the organizational web of administrative duties, the advisor would fit. This, in turn, brought a discussion of who the advisor would report to, and the possibility that instead of having one advisor who identified as queer of color like we were asking for, we would have two advisors, one in the space that houses ethnic student organization and one in the LGBT center. Discussing the role of the advisor, and what department would house such an advisor, took half of the meeting.

We left the meeting with no concrete answer to what would happen with the advisor, except that there would be work done to resolve the logistics of hiring someone, hopefully in the next five years. Regardless, everyone seemed to leave the meeting somewhat satisfied. For starters, the University of Utah might be one of the first institutions in the PAC 12 to institutionalized their queer of color student organization, and as QSOC, we secured funding to attend conferences and to program. However, I could not help but wonder at what cost we received this.

After our meeting all of us walked together, reflecting and commenting on what we heard, and discussed the outcomes of the meeting. We kept returning to the language and the discourse the administration engaged with to advocate for our support. We shared our concerns which each other and felt that administration believed we were something they could check off their list and that the language used made it seem like they were capitalizing on the multiplicities of our identities as something new they could add onto their recruiting pamphlet, and something new to make the University more competitive. All in all, we left that meeting debating whether the administration understood that the concept of acknowledgement and inclusivity, for us queer students of color, more often

than not is synonymous with safety.

This recent vignette illustrates the complicated relationship between QSOC and administration at the University of Utah. With the word "complicated," I am not referring to the to difficulty both groups have working with each other, but rather the way that they relate to one another. The vignette also brings to light what is at stake for queer students of color: a constant search for places of acceptance, or what we refer to as safety. This last point is the reason why QSOC was created. Like many other ethnic groups, QSOC is a response to the lack of space for queer students of color within the institution. As QSOC we contest our inability to be recognize by the university, but also the hostility we experience in both our mother ethnic organization and LGBT student organization for being both queer and of color and the reason why the demand for an advisor for QSOC was very important to us.

As I sat there listening to the administration talk about QSOC and the potential of having QSOC be institutionalized, I began to understand how the University conceptualizes students who delve into the multiplicities of marginalized identities. Essentially, it was clear that within the institution there is a designated space that deals with race and another that deals with gender and sexuality. Most importantly, however, there is no space in the institution for these two spaces to intersect.

I want to return to Crenshaw's original work of single-axis power dynamic, because in my attempt to theorize from and with the vignette, what is most apparent is that the lack of focus on the intersections of race and sexuality highlights the need to account for multiplicities of identity when considering how the social world is structured, in this case how the University is structured (Crenshaw, 1991). On this Crenshaw writes:

> Among the most troubling political consequences of the failure of antiracist and feminist discourses to address the intersections of race and gender is the fact that, to the extent they can forward the interest of "people of color" and "women", respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252)

This is exemplified by the institution suggesting two advisors instead of one. Our demand as QSOC to have an advisor was our desire for a visually embodied representation of an intersectional administrator, and thus an attempt to use administration's models of power in order to bring forth intersectionality.

I came to the realization that it was not necessarily that the administration we were talking to did not understand the complexity of being both queer and of color, but that within their work at the University, they had an institutional space for our ontological being to be represented. The University reads students as either part of their mother ethnic organization or of a queer organization. Students may be part of two different organizations, one queer and one ethnic, or both a queer and an ethnic organization, but they cannot exist in a queer-ethnic organization. As Crenshaw writes:

> As this analogy translates for Black women, the problem is that they can receive protection only to the extent that their experiences are recognizably similar to those whose experiences tend to be reflected in antidiscrimination doctrine. If Black women cannot conclusively say that "but for" their race or "but for" their gender they would be treated differently, they are not invited to climb through the hatch but told to wait in the unprotected margin until they can be absorbed into the broader, protected categories of race and sex. Despite the narrow scope of this dominant conception of discrimination and its tendency to marginalize those whose experiences cannot be described within its tightly-drawn parameters, this approach has been regarded as the appropriate framework for addressing a range of problems. In much of feminist theory and, to some extent, in antiracist politics, this framework is reflected in the belief that sexism and racism can be meaningfully discussed without paying attention to the lives of those other than the race-, gender- or class privileged. As a result, both feminist theory and antiracist politics have been organized, in part, around the equation of racism with what happens to the Black middle-class or to Black men, and the equation of sexism with what happens to white women. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 65)

In other words, we can be categorized as students of color, or we can be categorized as queer because in the backdrop of diversity there are only one way streets, to use Crenshaw's (1989) traffic analogy. I believe this partially accounts for why we were nonexistent for the university. It is important to also acknowledge that for queer students of color the driving force for these demands has been the constant search for "safe places" and the need to feel safe, not an attempt to diversify the university. Thus, safety has become the catalyst for choosing where to identify as queer, where to identify as only of color, when to do both, and to some extent the reason why these demands have been constructed.

Although the idea of "safety" is very controversial and complex for the queer community, it is nonetheless a recurring theme in the vignettes. For many, safety is an arbitrary variable, given that its definition varies according to the spectrum of sexual and gender identity. However, I want to engage Muñoz with this concept of safety because to Muñoz:

> Ideology is the imaginary relations of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The location of ideology is always within an *apparatus* and its practice or practices, such as the state apparatus...Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentifaction is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counterideinfication, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance. (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11-12)

By paring disidentification with this vignette we gain a way to understand the relationality ultimately between QSOC and safe places. For me, Muñoz's notion of disidentification is more than enacting on the agency to choose when and how to

disassociate with dominant ideology, but rather, it is a way to contest it and make room for what does not exist within it and thus moving to a safer place. This is demonstrated by the way that QSOC uses its multiple identities as a tactic to play off diversity to gain what it wants. Disidentification is not a theory or idea of reaction, but one of proactivity. While the University is attempting to "challenge" dominant ideology through diversity (though whether they are actually challenging it or perpetuating dominant culture is a whole different discussion in itself), as demonstrated by the comments of the administration, QSOC is challenging dominant ideology around safety. Thus, we can see how queer students of color can choose to disidentify to create safe spaces.

Muñoz goes on to engage a summary of a dialogue between Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek where Butler questions, "What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?' To this Butler, herself answers, "it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that the failure of identification, is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference (Munoz, 1999, p. 12). Here both Munoz and Butler paved the way to understand what they both call a "disidentifactory subject" who tactically and simultaneously works on, with and against a cultural form" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 12). Perhaps by using disidentification with queer students of color, we can see how, as a practice, disidentification "does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholy subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to his object and invest it with new life" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 12). For QSOC disidentification may be the most important tool to bring about visibility to issues of queer students of color, mainly because its gives queer

students of color a way to simultaneously work on and against cultural reform without the necessity of negotiating their identities.

3.2 Theorizing From a Mess

That day I got to my friend's apartment a little earlier to help them[5] organize their studio. We had borrowed a bench from a friend, I took some of my chairs, and borrowed some small pieces of furniture from another friend of ours. We both laughed at how hard we were trying to make the studio comfortable for everyone because "we POC[6] had to make our mamas proud." As we waited for everyone to arrive, we debated on what we should cook. After going back and forth for some time, we decided we should make rice, brew coffee, cut some fruit, and prepare some eggs. We had scheduled brunch for ten in the morning, but like always, our running joke is that we function in "people of color time," so we were not surprised when folks started arriving closer to eleven. As folks trickled in, we all greeted each other; we commented on someone's new tattoo and discussed how our parents would have reacted if they knew how many tattoos we had. People shared their parents' acknowledgement of a queer identity, which in turn led us to theorize that maybe our parents are ok with us being queer if they approve of our hairstyles and who we date. We shared any gossip we had about our romantic interests and other drama on campus. By the time everyone had arrived, we had multiple dishes of rice, all sorts of fruits, any and all styles of cooked eggs, different hot sauces, bacon and coffee. Once again, we commented on the irony of all of us bringing similar dishes, we shared recipes, and speculated what our parents would say or do if they were present with

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[5] Some vignettes utilize plural pronounce as a way to be gender neutral and gender inclusive.
[6] POC is a commonly used term that signifies People of Color.

us at our brunch.

As queer students of color, we are always looking for ways to create community. I'm convinced this is the reason why as much time as we spend celebrating our cultures and honoring our families, we also spend time sharing our struggles. As my friend and I prepared their studio for our gathering, we took advantage of the time we had together to do our weekly check in. We were old roommates so it was very natural for us to have "check-ins" while cooking. They asked how I was doing and I vented about the difficulties of balancing familial responsibilities as first-born daughter and first-generation college student, how uncomfortable I felt in certain spaces within the University, and how frustrated I was with school in general. All of these were frequent topics of discussion within QSOC. However, I was caught off guard when my friend asked me to clarify if I was frustrated with school or the institution. I thought about this throughout our brunch, specially when folks shared their experiences. These can be paraphrased as:

- "I can't believe they told me that we need to draw this arbitrary line somewhere, she gave me this really weird example like 'let's just say there's this queer person from Montana, are we gonna make a group just for queer people from Montana? I think they were using this example to say we're too specific and the U can't accommodate for us."

- "I'm not sure if they're being condescending or not. I'm not even sure if she knows my name, but every time she sees me she wants to talk about diversity. Like, good job, bro, I don't know why you are talking to me?! I know she does it cuz she thinks I fit into all student groups."

- "They told me they think more students of color should run for student government. I told them it was violent, like have you seen who is in student government?! They said well, I wouldn't say violent. Think of it as paving the way for other queer students of color. This is coming from the person who thanked me for being the only trans person in the office because I remind them that they have to be inclusive. "

I listened and nodded with others QSOC members. Gasped at the things they shared and thought to myself, "Who do these people think we are? Are we their trophy they can stick wherever they want? Is this what people say about us?"

When brunch was over I stayed to help clean. My friend and I debriefed, and commented on what other QSOC members had shared. We reflected on the fluidity of our identities, their temporalities, the idea of being all of them at once but also honoring them individually and acknowledging that they shift depending on where we were and who we were with. I must have been taking long pauses in our conversation because my friend asked if I was ok. I remember saying something along the lines of "Oh yes, I'm ok. I'm just thinking of how complicated this queer of color life is," to which they responded, "I know, it's all a mess."

This vignette has a dual purpose. First, it provides an example of what it is like to be a queer and first-generation student of color in a conservative and primarily White institution. It also intends to demonstrate that race and sexuality are deeply and intricately connected and that the intersections of race and sexuality, and often class as well, create different levels of tension depending on the space that they are being enacted in. As discussed in the previous vignette, often as queer students of color, we shift and mold our

identities for reasons of safety. Therefore, I want to try to pair assemblages with this vignette, and attempt to compare and contrast intersectionality with assemblages.

I recently engaged in a conversation where I was arguing that intersectionality, as Crenshaw proposed, was mostly about power dynamics and the systemic way in which dualities and multiplicities of identities are erased. However, a fellow scholar challenged me to think, "How can it be only about power when in the process of analyzing intersections we are still categorized based on identities?" I first want to contest the idea of intersection through identity politics and propose that perhaps, what I have learned from these vignettes and how I have come to conceptualize intersectionality to be, is that intersectionality serves as a tool to make sense of systemic oppression through the lenses of our multiple identities and our bodies, rather than trying to making sense of our subjectivity and bodies based on systemic oppression. I find the best example of this being the previous vignette, where as "disidentifying subjects" queer students of color often find themselves using the multiplicities of their identities and the intersectionality of those identities to justify the need to create space within the institution for the recognition of their subjectivity. However, it is true that intersectionality has become so much about the construction of identity that perhaps, as Puar (2012) suggests, we should consider thinking about Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality alongside with assemblages in order to bridge the way that institutional systems read, or do not read, our subjectivity and the way that we queer students of color enact our subjectivity. I want to push Puar and propose that we should also consider maintaining disidentification in dialogue with assemblages and intersectionalities to construct a holistic idea of the experiences of queer students of color.

However, the break and split I have come to understand between intersectionality and assemblages is that, as I quote Puar once again:

> ...what the method of interscitonality is most predominantly used to qualify is the *specific difference* of "women of color," a category that has now become, I would argue, simultaneously emptied of specific meaning in its ubiquitous application and yet overdetermined in its deployment. In this usage, intersectionality always produces an Other, and that Other is always a Women of color... who must invariably be shown to be resistant, subversive, or articulating a grievance. (Puar, 2012, p. 52)

And it is here where I see queer students of color contesting intersectionality and engaging with assemblages. For example, this vignette exemplifies how queer students of color are pointed out as the Other (people stating QSOC is a club for a very specific group of people, the presence of QSOC member forcing people to think about inclusivity, and the token student that because of their multiple grounds of identity must understand the struggles of all marginalized people) against the backdrop of normative ideology, regardless of the fact that at that given point in time, and in the space, a queer student of color may not necessarily be identifying with anything other than the same identity shared by those in that specific space for reasons of safety.

Thus, I'm provoked to think of the possibilities and limitations of engaging with discourses of safety. I wonder, how can a subject who is constantly negotiating their identity, "who must invariably be shown to be resistant, subversive, or articulating a grievance," push for safety when the idea of safety may not even be conceptualized by mainstream ideology? For this, I turn to Puar, who continues to write:

> Despite decades of feminist theorizing on the question of difference, difference continues to be "difference from", that is, the difference from "white woman." Distinct from a frame that privileges "difference within," "difference from" produces difference as a contradiction rather than as a recognizing [*sic*] it as perpetual and continuous process of splitting. (Puar, 2007, p. 53)

I am also compelled to think with assemblages for this vignette because I am intrigued by the concept of recognizing "difference as a perpetual and continual process of splitting" as an opportunity to engage with the discourse of safety. Thus taking Currier's definition of assemblage may allow us to understand the shifting multiplicity of identities in search for safety in relation to the "intensities, forces and flows of components" when they "meet with and link with the forces and flows of the other components" (Currier, 2003, p. 325). However, as I write this I realize that intersectionality is very much about the subject and the body. More importantly, I recognize that we can see a visual, embodied representation of an intersection (Black women, women of color, queer women, queer people of color and so on), but what is an embodied assemblage?

In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) writes, "Assemblages help us read the body "as discontinuous, notable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations" (Grosz, 1994, p. 164). To this Currier further adds that "Rather bodies and other components of an assemblage are multiplicities and, as such, cannot be tto an originary unity. Assemblages are thus never simple aggregates or arrangements of already stable components…" (Currie, 2003, p. 329). Furthermore, in thinking of bodies in terms of assemblages, Currier takes from Deleuze and Guattari to contest the understanding of the 'body' as a unity, through which organic materials, processes, energies, and capacities are ordered and constrained. Groz, Currie, Deluze, and Guattari refuse the subordination of the parts to the whole, that is, the explanation of bodily forces, and experience through the overarching structure of a unified body. For them, an

assemblage is a network of relations between bodies, things, and ideas. They strive to understand how these relations are affected or how they affect, they are not preoccupied with the agency or subjectivity of the social actor. Thus, I have also come to think of an assemblage not as an ending point, like intersectionality, but rather as a process that leads to an ending point. Going back to my analogy of the water molecule of identities, it seems feasible to use assemblage to understand the shifting in the "bonds" between the multiple identities, depending on their environment when seeking safety. However, if an assemblage is a network of relationships that contest the body as a *unit*, can an assemblage indeed be embodied? By keeping queer students of color, and queer people of color, in play with new debates of intersectionality, not only do we demonstrate the limitations of intersectionality but also the limitations of assemblages.

4. INFINITY AND BEYOND: A FUTURE WHERE WE CAN BREATHE

"Our ancestors dreamed us up and the bent reality to create us"
Walidah Imarisha, Octavia's Brood

I spend a lot of time reflecting about my time with my family at the table. It was there where I began my complicated push and pull relationship with the multiplicities of my identities. As I ate dinner with my family, I often tried to reconcile the difference of being "American" with having a dinner experience that was very different than the one portrayed on television. The kitchen table is also where I cried to my mom as I told her I like girls, and where after that conversation, she hid her anger and I my sadness in preparation for dinner. It is when I sit at this dinner table that I miss my family the most, where I have laughed with other queer students of color the most and where I think about the future the most. As I reflect on my experiences as a QSOC member, as well as why I chose to do a thesis on intersectionality, I worry about implications of the unescapable complexity of intersection, assemblages and disidentification that this work uncovers. Much like my experiences at the dinner table, I worry about the experiences of my children and often wonder what a world that has strong tensions with intersection, assemblages and disidentifactory objects has to offer to them.

The LGBT Resource Center at the University of Utah recently had a discussion series for its students. One of the topics for discussions was on "Queer Futurities." Given the recent rally on campus, I thought it would be interesting to join the discussion. When I showed up, I was really excited to see the majority of QSOC members at the event, and

was startle by the fact that those in attendance were mostly QSOC members. In essence, it turned out to be QSOC discussion facilitated by the LGBT Center with a few queer non-QSOC members. We started the gathering by first reflecting on the struggles of queer students and present day experiences, and we shared stories of our "intimate communities," discussed what "trauma-inform relationships" were, and the joys in being able to hold each other. We decided that we would split into groups and do an activity of an imaginary future—who was in that future, what that future would look like and also what that future would feel like. Our task was to imagine ourselves grocery shopping (I found it humorous given that the majority of students participating in the discussion were from QSOC) with our small groups, and then reunite to share what we discussed with everyone. During our debrief, as we shared what we discussed or imagined in our smaller groups, a students shared that for them a "constant struggle for survival was like clinging your first…it's not that I don't wish that we weren't resilient anymore, I just wish we could unclinge a bit. I wish we could let go. Breathe a little."

What follows is an imaginary vignette where I explore the intersections of identities and imagination, the gray areas of race, gender and sexuality, love, inequality, oppression, resistance, and hope.

<u>4.1 Dear Diary</u>

Dear Diary,

Today would've been my mother's birthday. I wanted to cook for her, but these agricultural scientists have not been able to establish the growth of all the spices we used to use on land. So, I've turned to you, Diary, to document and keep my thoughts. I have to admit that I'm a little confused as to whether I can even refer to you as "Diary,"

knowing that everything I do is connected to the cloud and someone can easily read this. But maybe that is good. Maybe someone is meant to read this. Back on Earth we used paper and pencil and I could hide what I wrote from whomever I wanted to. Now I'm writing, I mean typing, on this "holographic paper." That is such a misleading name. There is nothing paper-like about this holographic thing. There are no trees here. I think that is what I miss the most about the old world.

It's been six decades since the third world war broke off. When the second epidemic of HIV hit, everyone had a theory about who started it. Those who caught it, had to blame someone. Because most of those who were conquered by the disease happened to be white and cisgender, whatever super-being and creator they believed in could not possibly be the one to blame. Jesus was out of the question.

So the government classified it a "radical left terrorist attack," but who could be surprised at such a decision when more than half of the country at that time helped elect Donald Trump to presidency. With Muslims banned from the country and the "Big Wall" keeping new immigrants out of the United States, people of color already in the country and queers were left to blame. The "healthy" regrouped in the West Coast, started constructing big buildings to keep those infected and those that were HIV negative separate from each other. Survivors had formed lynch mobs after the epidemic had been classified as a terrorist attack. Police did not want to protect brown and black bodies, much less the gays. No one wanted to touch them.

Eventually some rich politician suggested that people of color (except for anyone in the Asian diaspora because they were smarter and could help find a cure), queers, and their descendants be interned in housing complexes "for their own protection." No one

explained how herding up everyone who was not white or straight, and forcibly incarcerating them could be for their best interest. But as history had proven, the American government did not need an explanation, or any proof, as much as they needed someone to point a finger to. So anyone who protested or dared speak up was also thrown into the camps.

I do not know much of the details of the revolt except that it started with a civil war in the United States, and then México got involved, Canada was its ally and eventually the United Nations crumbled. Countries still held grudges at the United States government for its previous immigration laws, but somehow justified closing their borders as well. Eventually, everyone got mad at each other, pulled out their big guns and blew up the world.

The disease killed off a lot of the white folks, and the war added a few more casualties. The joke was on them, though. The government never ran tests on us, and had no idea that we were actually relatively healthy. What was left for us to do was to learn how to survive. We grew our food, traded, and made new technology. Although there was some intergroup racism and some homophobia, we had managed to somehow work together to survive. Eventually, when the time came to revolt, we were strong. The American government was too busy to pay attention to their doctors, who were telling them that their citizens were slowly dying and soon white people would not be the majority. Needless to say when we revolted, we were strong.

Any who, after the US pulled their big bombs and made the world uninhabitable, we had to escape. That's how we ended up in this floating world. And now here I am, writing on this holographic paper.

Something about my mom's birthday made me reflect on all this history. Maybe it was not my mom's birthday as much at it was the fact that Regina and Thiago, my favorite tenth graders, kept looking at me like I was talking in a different language. I was telling them about paper and pencil, such a foreign concept to them, but then again, what we learn in a class about "Technologies of the Past World" may seem foreign to a lot of these young kids. Nonetheless, these young students remind me why I decided to be a teacher.

Next week the school will be hosting a Valentine's dance. The whole school is really excited about it. Thiago was telling me he is planning on wearing his new five panel cap with a matching bowtie his friend made after seeing picture of what student organizers were wearing during the Black Lives Matter rallies they were studying in history class. He wants to match those with his new hoop earrings and heels he found at the vintage store. Regina said her and her boyfriend were going to wear matching skirts and ties. As both Thiago and Regina told me their plans, they were laughing at what they had learned in history class. They said, "Ms. Vázquez, can you believe that in the old world they had clubs just for gay people?! There was this club in … I think it was in this city called The Angels… or something like that… well, that club had five rooms for five different types of music. It's like our dance, except that we have an "all femme loving room" and "genderless." I guess in the old world they would move from room to room depending on the music they want to dance to and here we move around depending on who we want to be for the hour." The day before they had come to me during lunch telling me about a gay dating application they learned about in sociology class. The application was called Grindr and they could not believe that "no black men" and "Asians

only" were common signs in the dating application.

However, this is not a utopia and I'm sure the dance will remind us of that. We still have a lot of racial tensions between students of color, and some very conservative families of color that are tolerant of sexual diversity but not accepting. And what do we do of the land? My students talk about desire to taste the spices their grandparents talk about that do not yet exist in this space ship. It is interesting how they describe it like a memory engraved in their bones and cannot understand. It has taken a third world war, another HIV epidemic, and 60 years for us to get to the world where schools do not have a dress code for a Valentine's dance, but at the cost of what?

Dear Holographic Diary, this is a letter to my mother. I want to let her know that her revolution was not at all a waste of her life. After all, the struggle for survival is based on resilience. I need her to know that everyone in this new world knows the prejudice of the old world and that is knowledge we hope to pass down to generations to come. Holographic Diary, let my mother know that making sense of our identities is still difficult, that Thiago's heels still yearn for that land that she walked on. Tell her that on this day of her birth we are alive. We are all breathing.

I was introduced to Afrofuturism the first semester of my second year of my Master's program. As a self-identified queer AfroLatina, I had been searching for something, anything, that would help me understand my experiences with the multiplicity of my identities. Afrofuturism opens the doors to a space where I could speculate and imagine a different world than this present one, one where the intersectionalities of my identities, assemblages and all the necessary disidentificaitions evolve into an epistemic standpoint where there could be or could not be any tension between the previously stated

theories.

Contemporary Afrofuturism is an intellectual and artistic movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s with musicians, like Sun Ra and George Clinton. The term Afrofuturism was first described by Mark Dery in 1993 in relation to speculative fiction and technoculure's relationship with the African American community (Anderson, 2014). Afrofutirist theorizes from the "Black Atlantic" and the notion that the middle passage was the apocalypse for Black folk when thousands of African peoples were "dragged into a world which could not possibly make sense to them, and from which they could not escape other than at the risk of self-annihilation" (Mayer, 2000, p. 556). For Afrofuturists, the middle passage, as a space, acquires a whole set of new connotations. The middle passage exemplifies enforced displacement and cotemporary scenarios of migration (Mayer, 2000, p. 556). As Hortense Spillers argues, the middle passage allows us to concentrate on the fantasy of space in between and nowhere at all, a space were people can represent themselves as mixed up "… removed from the indigenous land and culture and not yet American either, these captive person, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all" (Spillers 1987, p. 466). Thus Critical Afrofuturist theory "operates from a standpoint that intersects theories of time and space, technology, class, race, gender, and sexuality and delineates a general economy of racialization in relation to forces of production and apocalyptic, dystopian and utopian futures" (Anderson, 2014, p. 183).

However more than a popular culture and speculative fiction, Afrofuturisms also examine

> the aesthetics and intellectual terrain of the so-called posthumous/post racial
> future posited by mostly white futurist and remains connected to an African

humanistic past. It reinvents a visionary discourse relating to the diasporic experience and impacted by technological transformation, and it maintains a counternarrative that intersects history, progress, tradition, innovation, memory, the authentic and the engineered, and analogue and digital within space of African-diasporic culture. (Anderson, 2015, pp. 181-182)

Raynaldo Anderson quotes Marlo David to futher explain Afrofuturism by writing that "Afrofuturist thought posits a reconciliation between an imagined disembodied identity-free future and the embodied identity-specific past and present, which can provide a critical link through which post-soul artists can express a radical black subjectivity (Anderson, 2015, p. 181).

I am drawn to Afrofutirism for this thesis because of what we can learn from an Afrofuturist who "is consciously or unconsciously writing, painting or artistically expressing the lives of African peoples in relation to other sentient beings in the past, present, or future(s) and is released from a static representation of particularist form of identity that is free and remains politically or artistcally engaged" (Anderson, 2015, p. 182) in our attempt to make sense of queer students of color subjectivity and imagine a future for our "queer spawn."[7]

I wrote the previous vignette with a lot of inspiration from Walidah Imarisha's introduction to *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. In her introduction to this compilation of science fiction short stories written by social activist writers, she states that, "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds…" (Imarisha, 2015, p. 3).

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[7] A term used to described the sons and daughters of queer folks.

She goes on to write:

> We believe this space [referring to the short stories] is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless. …We specially wanted to make space for people whose identities are marginalized and oppressed within mainstream society. Art and culture themselves are time-traveling, planes of existence where the past, present, and future shift seamlessly in and out. And for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. (Imarisha, 2015, pp. 4-5)

Thus with the encouragement of Imarisha's words, this vignette is an attempt to imagine a world where by writing new voices and communities into the future we can imagine beyond the boundaries of "the real" and possibly move towards sculpting reality from our dreams imagined. In writing this vignette I had many conversations with members of QSOC, and constantly returned to the "Queer Futurities" discussion facilitated by the LGBT Resources Center on campus. I found myself navigating the tension of a utopia versus an alternative future, because as Reynaldo Anderson (2015) writes:

> …despite the creative possibilities of Afrofuturism, the continues threat posed by white supremacy in relation to biological processes and technology and a potential future for Africana peoples shows that a critical assessment related to struggle and the collective survival of the community cannot be neglected. (Anderson, 2015, p. 182)

In other words, I did not want to write a utopia because a utopia proposes the danger of merging all subjectivities in the name of equality and thus losing the specific uniqueness of a queer of color subjectivity. However, as I wrote this, trying to maintain the queer of color in play, I realized that even in a speculative future, where we are given a greater playroom to practice imaging places where we can bridge a "disembodied identity-free future and the embodied identity-specific past" there was still something a

queer of color subject was losing. In my vignette this was the land, the students'

connection to their ethnic ontology.

5. CONCLUSION

"Tragic times do not beg for complexity"
- Bao Phi, Revolution Shuffle

I was asked who I intended the audience of this work to be. When I started thinking about writing this thesis, and during the writing process, I never thought about who I wanted my audience to be. This thesis has been a search for some personal answers to my own inability to conceptualize my relationship as a queer student of color to an institution of higher learning, or make sense of my relationship as a queer student of color to other students, and more importantly, understand how what we learn at the University helps us learn about ourselves as students, as students of color, as queer students, and as queer students of color. Having said that, throughout this thesis I found myself trying to disrupt discourses of diversity from a policy perspective, and bridging that with subjectivities and experiences of queer students of color. However, I have found that putting theories of intersectionality to work with queer students of color, within our outside the discourses of diversity, is very difficult.

In the introduction to *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson (2004) pronounces that

> queer of color critique approaches culture as one site that compels identification with and antagonisms to the normative ideals promoted by state and capital. … Queer of color analysis must examine how culture as a site of identification produces such odd bedfellows and how it—as the location of antagonisms— fosters unimagined alliances. As an epistemological intervention, queer of color analysis denotes an interest in materiality, but refuses ideologies of transparency and reflection…queer of color analysis… eschew the transparency of all these

formulations and opts instead for an understanding of nation and capital as the outcome of manifold intersections that contradict the idea of the liberal nation-state and capital as sites of resolution, perfection, progress, and confirmation…To restate, queer of color analysis presumes that liberal ideology occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practices. (Ferguson, 2004, pp. 3-4)

I take on this quote by Ferguson because this is very much what I have uncovered through this work. Ferguson claims that queer of color subjectivities unveil the mechanisms in which liberal ideology obstructs manners in which intersectionality can inform the way we construct or reconstruct our social practices, and this to him is a queer of color critique. In attempting to understand new theories of intersectionality and what they uncover about the vignettes in this work and vice versa, I want to argue that maintaining queer of color in play with these new debates of intersectionality uncovers what Ferguson is also arguing: our theoretical homes in ethnic studies, gender studies, and education studies have not embraced a queer of color critique and that has created a limitation in how we can possibly bring together queer of color subjectivity and ontology with different discourses of diversity. This lack of theoretical framework that evolves strictly from the ontological being and epistemological process of queer of colors subjects is perhaps the reason why the sole presence of a queer of color group at university seems cumbersome.

Often as queer students of color we ask: What are we doing? What is our job here? In her article "*Bleeding over Species Lines: Writing against Cartographies of the Human in Queer of Color Fiction",* Megan Molenda LeMay (2014) refers back to Gloria Anzaldúa by writing, "Why do cultures condemn and discard those who linger too closely to the prescribed border Anzaldúa asks? Because, she explains, the queer are a mirror that reflect the deep-seated fear that what lies on the other side of the normal is the

nonhuman" (LeMay, 2014, p. 8). Perhaps as QSOC and as queer of color we serve to push the institution to really want to think of two things: (1) what is their true desire with diversifying the university, and (2) much like Afrofuturisms pushes us to think, what are the possibilities of moving towards an imaginary future outside the rigid confines of our humanistic tendencies to categorize everything. In other words, this thesis, though grounded on the stories and ontology of a queer student of color, probes us to think of the greater implications of the queer, the nonfighting, the outsider, the one there is no room for, the one whose simple act of existing changes the functions of spaces and places, times and rationalities.

As I conclude this work I think back to the questions of who this work was intended for, and I come to an understanding that maybe this work was not just for me, but for queer students of color, and allies and institutions to think of risk and hope of us dreaming and bending a reality for those generations after us to come.

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