

DEVIANCE AS RESISTANCE

A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of constructing a field of investigation based in African American Studies and borrowing from queer theory and Black feminist analysis that is centered around the experiences of those who stand on the (out)side of state-sanctioned, normalized, White, middle- and upper-class, male heterosexuality. This would entail a paradigmatic shift in how scholars of Black politics and more broadly African American Studies think and write about those most vulnerable in Black communities—those thought to be morally wanting by both dominant society and other indigenous group members. Using a theoretical framework for studying Black politics that highlights the construction and malleability of categories as well as the work of processes of normalization found in queer theory in tandem with the detailed understanding of power, in particular as it is structured around and through axes such as race, gender, and class found in African American Studies, we might gain new insights into the everyday politics of those at the bottom in Black communities.

Despite the feelings of some in Black communities that we have been shamed by the immoral behavior of a small subset of community members, those some would label the underclass, scholars must take up the charge to highlight and detail the agency of those on the outside, those who through their acts of nonconformity choose outsider status, at least temporarily. An intentional deviance given limited agency and constrained choices sits at the center for this field of research. These individuals are not fully or completely defining themselves as outsiders nor are they satisfied with their outsider status, but they are also not willing to adapt completely, or to conform. The cumulative impact of such choices might be the creation of spaces or counter publics, where not only oppositional ideas and discourse happen, but lived opposition, or at least autonomy, is chosen daily. Through the repetition of deviant practices by multiple individuals, new identities, communities, and politics might emerge where seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior can be transformed into conscious acts of resistance that serve as the basis for a mobilized politics of deviance.

Keywords: Politics, Deviance, Respectability, Resistance, Agency, Autonomy, Queer, African American

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This article is motivated by a series of conversations I have had and observations I have made about the study of Black politics, African American Studies, and the condition of African American communities.¹ At the heart of such concerns has been what I believe to be a fundamental contradiction between the crises facing Black communities and the passive routinization of much of what passes for the academic study of Black people. As both the discipline of African American Studies and the sub-field of Black politics become more enmeshed in the curriculum and structures of colleges and universities, research in these areas seems to mirror the increasing specialization of disciplines and distancing between researcher and worldly experience that characterize the academy at this moment. It is the observation of disconnect between me and my colleagues and the communities from which many of us hail and purport to study that has motivated my interest in building a field of inquiry others have labeled Black queer studies.²

I must admit to being a skeptic of the transformative potential of anything we might label Black queer studies, especially as such efforts begin to resemble a recovery project of the lost tribe of Black gay exceptionals. It is, of course, a worthwhile undertaking to include as part of the canon of African American Studies, for example, those Black gay writers of the Harlem Renaissance or Black gay activists of the Civil Rights Movement who for too long have been hidden and silenced by those who would police the representation of such critical periods and events. Furthermore, I, like other scholars concerned with the future of African American Studies believe that the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, and queer lives would not only open up new realms of research in African American Studies, but should also lead to the reconsideration and reconceptualization of now standard narratives in the field. For example, John D'emilio, in his book *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (2003), not only rightly inserts Rustin into African American and American history, establishing him as an architect of the Civil Rights Movement, but also helps us to interrogate the concept of leader and the standards used to construct public leaders both in and outside of Black communities. Barbara Ransby, in her book, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (2003) makes a similar intervention around the issues of gender, sex, and leadership. However, in spite of the insights to be gained from a project of inclusion, the approach to queering African American Studies that I advocate is one based in an expansive understanding of who and what is queer and is, therefore, rooted in ideas such as deviance and agency and not exception and inclusion.

Queer theorists and queer activists since the 1980s, in an effort to challenge seemingly stable and normalizing categories of sexuality, introduced or reintroduced the analytic concept of queer. Individuals such as Judith Butler (1990), Eve Sedgwick (1990), Diana Fuss (1991), and Michael Warner (1993) produced what are now thought of as some of the grounding texts to the field of "queer theory." Working from a variety of postmodernist and poststructuralist theoretical perspectives, these scholars focused on identifying and contesting the discursive and cultural markers found within both dominant and marginal identities and institutions that prescribe and reify "heterogendered" or normalized understandings and behavior. These theorists presented the academy with a different conceptualization of sexuality, one which sought to replace socially named and presumably stable and natural categories of sexual expression with an understanding of the constructed and fluid movement among and between forms of sexual behavior.

Despite complicating our understanding of sexuality, heterosexism, and heteronormativity, some queer theorists, and more queer activists, write and act in ways that unfortunately homogenize everything that is publicly identifiable as heterosex-

ual and most things that are understood to be lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender or “queer” (Cohen 1997). Further diminishing the returns from this very important theoretical work has been the incredible silence in many of the writings by queer theorists on the subject of race, in particular the structural access to power that results from the designation of Whiteness in a relatively persistent racial order where White and Black root opposite poles of at least one dimension (Kim 2000). Disappointingly, left largely unexplored has been the role of race and one’s relationship to dominant power in constructing the range of public and private possibilities for such fundamental concepts/behaviors as desire, pleasure, and sex.³ So while we can talk of the heterosexual and the queer, these labels/categories tell us very little about the differences in the relative power of, for example, middle-class White gay men and poor heterosexual Black women and men.

For me, this serious shortcoming in queer theory is not the end of my interest in or use for this field of scholarship. Instead, in spite of noted absences in queer theory as it is currently constituted, there are still important insights to be gained from this literature that will enhance the study of sex and race in many disciplines including African American Studies.⁴ If, for example, we use the theoretical insights into the construction and malleability of categories as well as the work of processes of normalization found in queer theory in tandem with the detailed understanding of power, in particular as it is structured around and through axes such as race, gender, and class found in African American Studies, we have the possibility of reconstituting both African American Studies and queer theory with an eye toward recognizing and transforming how people live and the desperate conditions they too often face.

A focus, for example, on poor single Black women, with children whose intimate relationships and sexual behavior are often portrayed as directly in conflict with the normative assumptions of heterosexism and the nuclear family, but who also often live under the constant surveillance of the state through regulatory agencies such as welfare offices, courts, jails, prisons, child protective services and public housing authorities, might do much to advance the work of both those who locate themselves exclusively in African American Studies or queer theory. In contrast to many privileged gay, lesbian, and queer folks, poor single Black women with children, structurally unable to control an exclusive “ghetto” or area of a city where their dealings with the state are often chosen and from an empowered position, are reminded daily of their distance from the promise of full citizenship. Their lives are indicative of the intersection of marked identities and regulatory processes, relative powerlessness and limited and contradictory agency. It is here that Black queer studies must be rooted and a politics of deviance must begin.

Thus, I continue to be interested in the possibility of constructing a field of investigation based in African American Studies and borrowing from queer theory and Black feminist analysis that is centered around the experiences of those who stand on the (out)side of state sanctioned, normalized White, middle- and upper-class, male heterosexuality. I am talking about a paradigmatic shift in how scholars of Black politics and more broadly African American Studies think and write about those most vulnerable in Black communities—those thought to be morally wanting by both dominant society and other indigenous group members. The reification of the nuclear family, the conformity to institutionally prescribed and informally regulated gender roles and intimate sexual relations are but the tip of the normative moral super structure they confront daily.

Sadly, while the moral prescriptions of this normative structure pervade nearly every aspect of our lives and have been used consistently to marginalize African

Americans further, little attention has been paid, at least in the social sciences, to how the normalizing influences of the dominant society have been challenged, or at least countered, often by those most visible as its targets. Reflecting Michel Foucault's idea of simultaneous repressive and generative power, individuals with little power in society engage in counter normative behaviors, having babies before they are married, structuring their relationships differently from the traditional nuclear family, or rejecting heterosexuality completely. These so-called deviants have chosen and acted differently, situating their lives in direct contrast to dominant normalized understandings of family, desire, and sex. It is these instances of deviant practice, resulting from the *limited agency* of those most marginal in Black communities that are the heart of this work.

Scholars, especially those interested in the evolving nature of Black politics, must take seriously the possibility that in the space created by deviant discourse and practice, especially in Black communities, a new radical politics of deviance could emerge. It might take the shape of a radical politics of the personal, embedded in more recognized Black counter publics, where the most marginal individuals in Black communities, with an eye on the state and other regulatory systems, act with the limited agency available to them to secure small levels of autonomy in their lives. Ironically, through these attempts to find autonomy, these individuals, with relatively little access to dominant power, not only counter or challenge the presiding normative order with regard to family, sex, and desire, but also create new or counter normative frameworks by which to judge behavior.

And while these choices are not necessarily made with explicitly political motives in mind, they do demonstrate that people will challenge established norms and rules and face negative consequences in pursuit of goals important to them, often basic human goals such as pleasure, desire, recognition, and respect. These visible choices and acts of defiance challenge researchers to identify how we might leverage the process people use to choose deviance to choose political resistance as well. It just might be that after devoting so much of our energy to the unfulfilled promise of access through respectability, a politics of deviance, with a focus on the transformative potential found in deviant practice, might be a more viable strategy for radically improving the lives and possibilities of those most vulnerable in Black communities.

Finally, it is important to remember, as theorists of stigma and deviance have written, that understandings of what is respectable and stigmatized or normal and deviant are constructed and relational. Erving Goffman (1963) in his book *Stigma* writes, "Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories. . . . We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands" (p. 2). Howard Becker (1973) in his study of the sociology of deviance continues along this line of reasoning and suggests that scholars be attuned to the distinction between rule-breaking behavior and the labeling of such behavior as deviant. He writes, ". . . deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender.' The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (p. 9).⁵

In the rest of this article I will explore the feasibility of a politics of deviance in Black communities. I begin this investigation with a brief review of the major frameworks for studying Black politics. I then recount the ways deviance has been examined in some of the canonical texts in African American Studies. Finally, I detail how we might build an analytic model detailing the relationship between deviance, defiance, and resistance.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY OBSESSIONS: A BLACK POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY, ELITES, AND PUBLIC OPINION

A review of much of the recent scholarship exploring the politics of African Americans reveals at least three dominant analytic frameworks of study: mobilization, respectability, and public opinion. While each of these approaches to investigating Black politics allows for the inclusion of those most vulnerable and seemingly “deviant” in Black communities, absent in each approach is a serious examination of the potential for politics in the everyday decisions and actions of these individuals and groups. For example, possibly the most widely read form of analysis of Black politics has been scholarship documenting and analyzing the organized efforts, formal and informal movements, and less structured uprisings originating in Black communities, meant to alter hierarchies of power and resources based at least partially in racial distinctions (Horne 1995; Kelley 2002; Marable 1991; Morris 1984).

Work ranging from an analysis of Black revolts under slavery to the nationalist efforts of leaders like Marcus Garvey to the election of Black politicians to the mass mobilization defining the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements are all part of this tradition. However, more often than not, such scholarly analyses have sought to highlight those structured, coordinated, and seemingly purposeful acts assumed to comprise meaningful political struggle. Furthermore, these studies have at times been so consumed with the actions of leaders, usually male leaders, and well-established political organizations that they have ignored the everyday contests over space, dress, and autonomy that may pervade the lives of average Black people. Most of this literature, even when presumably exploring the work of “everyday” people, looks to those clearly defined political spaces like churches, civil rights organizations, and unions to find politics and political work, negating social spaces where most politics is lived (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Kelley 1994; Scott 1990).

Of course, a politics of mobilization has not been the only lens through which African American politics has been explored and described. A second dominant framework used to understand Black politics has been that of respectability. In this approach respectability is used to categorize a process of policing, sanitizing, and hiding the nonconformist and some would argue deviant behavior of certain members of African Americans communities (Carby 1987, Gaines 1996, Higginbotham 1993). In this literature respectability is understood as a strategy deployed primarily by the Black middle class but also by other individuals across the Black class strata to demonstrate their adherence to and upholding of the dominant norms of society. It is hoped and expected that such conformity will confer full citizenship status, bringing with it greater access, opportunities, and mobility. And while some recent scholarship has cast a critical eye on the exclusionary processes associated with a political strategy of respectability, it is important that we not trivialize or demean this vehicle to political advancement since for many African Americans it was not only a mechanism to leverage dominant power but also a means to demonstrate the basic humanity and equality of Black Americans (Carby 1987, Gaines 1996, Higginbotham 1993, McBride 1998). It is, however, important to underscore, as critics of respectability remind us, the relative positioning necessary to prove that one is respectable and acceptable compared to other less fortunate “souls” who compromise the excluded.

Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), in her examination of Black women’s involvement and leadership in the Baptist church in the early twentieth century, describes the use of a politics of respectability to counter the dominant racist constructions of Blackness and gender. She writes, “While adherence to respectability enabled Black women to counter racist images and structures, their discursive

contestation was not directed solely at White Americans; the black Baptist women condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people. Their assimilationist leanings led to their insistence upon Blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of manners and morals. Thus the discourse of respectability disclosed class and status differentiation" (p. 187).

Thus, another approach to studying the politics of African Americans, an approach first deployed by scholars in the humanities, has been an interrogation of the extra-institutional, some might say, social and cultural actions of Black Americans. Through the framework of respectability the researcher is primarily concerned with the actions of those who would regulate, most often middle-class Black Americans and working-class Blacks with middle-class aspirations. Again, lost in this analysis are the agency and actions of those under surveillance, those being policed, those engaged in disrespected behavior. Missing from this understanding of Black politics is what Robin Kelley calls "a politics from below" (1994, p. 5).

The third and final approach to the study of Black politics I will mention briefly is the overwhelming focus on the public opinion of Black Americans found in the social sciences today, especially in the field of political science. Increasingly, as researchers in the social sciences became committed to the use of large N datasets to map out the political attitudes and behaviors of ordinary people, so too did scholars in the field of Black politics demonstrate increasing expertise in the use of statistical analysis in conjunction with newly developed datasets such as the National Black Election Study and the National Black Politics Study to explore the declared politics of Black respondents. The work of scholars such as Michael Dawson (2003, 1994), Larry Bobo (2000), Katherine Tate (1998), and many others has provided new insights into the ideological and behavioral dimensions of African American politics in the late twentieth century.

Unfortunately, while this literature often includes close analysis of differences in political attitudes and behavior based on class and in some cases sex and gender, the in-depth exploration of how such differences might be molded into a new politics for the twenty-first century has largely been ignored. This scholarship tends to excel in identifying and explaining differences found among African Americans and between African Americans and other members of racial and ethnic groups, most often White Americans. Left for a later day has been any sustained discussion of how the differences identified manifest themselves in the everyday lives and politics of Black people. Similarly, scholars of this orientation seem to shy away from more theoretical and normative discussions of what should be done to change the patterns of inequality, alienation, and anger evident in their data.

Thus, while all three of these approaches to analyzing politics and political work in Black communities have generated important insights, illuminating the multiple forms of resistance and ideas about politics found among Black Americans, there exists an inherent bias in each framework toward the recognition and study of a politics that is declared and traditionally organized. I am not suggesting that the political activity of poor, working-class, and marginal Black people has not made its way into our published accounts of Black politics. Instead, I contend that the politics of those most marginal in Black communities are usually discussed when they conform to traditional understandings of what constitutes legitimate politics, ranging from engagement with formal political institutions to the traditional, extra-systemic politics of riots, boycotts, and protests, to the adherence to dominant norms and expectations regarding behavior. Again, missing is an examination of the possibility of oppositional politics rooted outside of traditional or formal political institutions and, instead, in the daily lived experiences of those most marginal in Black communities.

Given these absences, those of us concerned with the lives and politics of Black people might do well to recalibrate our lens of examination toward those deemed “deviant” in Black communities, for here lies not only understudied populations but more importantly groups engaging in behaviors that I believe hold the potential for new understandings of how Black politics might once again become radically transformative for Black communities and the country at large. By transformative I am not arguing merely for better policies or a slight shift in the distribution of wealth and power, important as these advances are. Instead, I am suggesting that through a focus on “deviant” practice we are witness to the power of those at the bottom, whose everyday life decisions challenge, or at least counter, the basic normative assumptions of a society intent on protecting structural and social inequalities under the guise of some normal and natural order to life. However, not only do these individuals daily act in opposition to dominant norms, but they also contradict members of Black communities who are committed to mirroring perceived respectable behaviors and hierarchal structures.

I am urging scholars to take a critical and respectful look at such behavior, instead of the instinctive reaction of rushing to pathologize such acts. With careful investigation we might begin to understand why the same people who daily “reject” formal and informal incentives for conformity, choosing instead alternative and oppositional live-styles, are most often *not* engaged in the kind of mass mobilization that organizers and academics contend would significantly improve their lived condition. It is time for a new generation of scholars to put forth a new analytic framework for the study of Black politics, that of deviance. This, of course, means hearing from and listening to those who many would silence and make invisible in Black communities, individuals like single Black mothers, including those on welfare and/or teen-agers; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer members of Black communities; Black men on the “down-low” having at times risky sex with both men and women; and young Black men and women who are currently or have been incarcerated and who seem to engage uncritically in unlawful behavior with knowledge of the growing consequences of such behavior. Only by listening to their voices, trying to understand their motivations, and accurately centering their stories with all of its complexities in our work can we begin to understand and map the connection between deviant practice, defiant behavior, and political resistance.

PATHOLOGIZING BLACK DEVIANCE: AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND BEYOND

I am not suggesting that the topic of deviance has not found its way into the work of those studying and commenting on Black communities. The observance of and fascination with those labeled deviant has long existed in the social sciences and in African American Studies. By now we have all become accustomed and well equipped at pointing out the constant pathologizing of Black communities. The researchers of the Eugenics period, the Moynihan Report in 1965, work on the underclass, and the publishing of *The Bell Curve* (1996) have all been rightly incorporated into our understanding and narrative about the continued marginalization and attack on Black people. Less familiar, however, may be the pathologizing, in particular of the poor, women, lesbian and gay, and young Black people, that is part of the multiple traditions, to borrow a phrase from Rogers Smith (1993), that comprise the field of African American Studies.

Beginning with W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* and extending through St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton's *Black Metropolis* to more recent Black community studies, like those authored by Elijah Anderson and William Julius Wilson, there

has always been a tradition of pathologizing the behaviors of the African American poor and working class, especially women. In defense of these authors and other similar texts, the fundamental objective of such studies, I believe, is to describe the contours of Black communities and to mount a rigorous examination of the systemic discrimination experienced by these subjects. However, far too often, as the researcher works to differentiate the lived conditions of segments of Black communities, internalized normative judgments about the proper and natural structure of family, intimate relationships and forms of social interaction creep into the analysis and prescriptions about what must be done. It is here, under the guise of objectively studying Black communities that the assumed importance of the nuclear family, appropriate gender relations, and the efficiency of the capitalist system imposes an understanding of difference that results in the pathologizing of all those who would choose differently on such fundamental and often assumed truths. The result can be the textual presentation of the Black poor and other Black “deviants” as not only suffering from the systemic discrimination experienced by all Black Americans, but also as allowing cultural deficiencies to lead one down a deviant path. It thus becomes the duty of an enlightened Black elite to rescue this wayward group of Blacks, modeling for them the appropriate modes of behavior; those that will lead to assimilation, acceptances, and access. Briefly, let me offer two examples of work in this mode.

If we begin with Du Bois’s groundbreaking work in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), we find an astonishing piece of research emblematic of the ideals of objective social science study, but driven ever so forcefully with a mission of proving the respectability of the Negro race. With the help of his assistant Isable Eaton, Du Bois sets out to survey the conditions of the seventh ward of Philadelphia, mapping the lived condition of Black Americans as no scholar had before him. By the end of his work, Du Bois had visited or talked with nearly 5,000 individuals. Through his travels he observed the wide range of experience and lived condition thought to make up the Black experience. Throughout the book, Du Bois reminds the reader of the historical and continued discrimination that has shaped the lives of Black Americans. He does, however, also present what some have called the “ugly facts” of some Black communities including the high levels of crime, pauperism, and family disorganization. For Du Bois such behaviors could not be explained merely by discrimination and so it was incumbent on the author to offer what he believed to be a complex explanation for such occurrences, one that made visible discrimination, agency, and difference among the Negro classes. This complex or contradictory tone is apparent throughout the book as is evident in this discussion of crime.

It would, of course, be idle to assert that most of the Negro crime was caused by prejudice; the violent economic and social changes which the last fifty years have brought to the American Negro, the sad social history that preceded these changes, have all contributed to unsettle morals and pervert talents. Nevertheless it is certain that Negro prejudice in cities like Philadelphia has been a vast factor in aiding and abetting all other causes which impel a half-developed race to recklessness and excess. . .

Thus the class of Negroes which the prejudices of the city have distinctly encouraged is that of the criminal, the lazy and the shiftless; for them the city teems with institutions and charities; for them there is succor and sympathy; for the educated and industrious young colored man who wants work and not platitudes, wages and not alms, just rewards and not sermons—for such colored men Philadelphia apparently has no use (pp. 351–352).

It was in the end differences among Black Americans, in particular class differences among Black Americans, where Du Bois rooted his argument against grand racial theories of the inferiority of the Negro. How could a biological concept of race account for behavior and ability when such diversity in each attribute was evident in Philadelphia's seventh ward? Du Bois was especially intent on noting the variations in family structure as an indication of the profound differences among the multiple classes and characters of Black Americans. It was the absence of a strong nuclear family and its corresponding bourgeois sexual mores that aided systemic discrimination in destroying Black communities.

Kevin Gaines, in his writing on Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* reiterates this point about the importance of family structure to Du Bois's understanding of the Black condition and the limits of Black progress. He writes,

Bourgeois sexual morality provided Du Bois with a crucial means of articulating class differences among blacks, facilitating in his study a problematic linkage of poverty and immorality, and equating the disturbing presence of unmarried black women with promiscuity. He associated unemployment with idleness and sin, but his vision of lower-class status especially faulted all signs of the absence of the patriarchal black family. . .

Du Bois's discussion of the weakness of the family stemmed from the uplift assumption of the home and family as signs of progress and security, and sources of strength. Indeed much commentary on urban poverty targeted the status of the family as the barometer of social health or pathology. (p. 166)

While Du Bois's unflinching adherence to the assumption of the necessity and inherent preference of the nuclear family might be accepted as an indication of the times in which he was writing, we should be suspect of those writing today who continue to demonstrate uncritical allegiance to such assumptions. Unfortunately, such is the case of most recent writing on poor Black urban communities, especially those classified under the title the "underclass." Beginning largely in the 1960s, researchers began to categorize what they perceived as more severe indicators of destructive behaviors and characteristics found in poor urban communities. While scholars had always noted the escalated rates of out-of-wedlock and teen-age births, crime, welfare dependency, female-headed households, joblessness, and drug use in poor urban communities compared to other geographical areas, in the 1960s such behaviors were increasingly described as common-place, persistent, and disproportionate, especially among a sub-population of the urban poor deemed the "underclass."

As we might suspect, there are varied approaches to explaining these behaviors and exploring these communities in the literature of the "underclass." The point of this essay is not to survey the range of texts available. Instead, I want to examine briefly one of the most structurally based interrogations of the idea of an underclass to see how patriarchal and gender norms limit the analysis, prioritizing a move toward respectability in thinking about something as concrete as policy prescriptions. To that end, I believe a brief review of William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) will be helpful. Regarded by many in the academy and the Clinton administration as one of the most important scholars writing on the subject of the urban poor, Wilson seeks to provide a more rigorous and "balanced public discourse on the problems of the ghetto underclass" (p. 19). Wilson centers his analysis on the structural changes faced by the Black urban poor, highlighting in particular the shift in available jobs for members of the Black urban poor from

living-wage manufacturing jobs to low-wage service employment. While job opportunities were shrinking for the urban poor, middle-class and working-class African Americans experienced economic access and, thus, allowed some Black Americans to exit the inner-city for neighborhoods with better schools, services, and security. This exit has meant greater social isolation for the urban poor, resulting in a concentration of all ill effects associated with poverty and sustained marginalization.

While Wilson's concern with the exit of the Black middle-class has been problematized by numerous scholars, with one of the most hard-hitting treatments being that penned by Adolph Reed (1991), for this article I want to draw the reader's attention to the normative assumptions of Wilson's analysis and, more specifically, the prominent framing of a politics of respectability in Wilson's policy prescriptions to address the needs of the underclass. Continually in this work one is struck by the importance of the nuclear family structure and dominant gender relationships for the author. For example, after detailing the increased probability of living in poverty for female-headed households, Wilson does not urge a policy intervention that would focus on raising the wages of women, including single women and teen-agers who are heads of households. Instead, Wilson locates the remedy for the poverty experienced by women and children in the reemergence of viable families, specifically expanding women's marriageability pool of employed men. He writes, "[t]he black delay in marriage and the lower rate of remarriage, each associated with high percentages of out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households, can be directly tied to the employment status of black males. Indeed, black women, especially young black women, are confronting a shrinking pool of 'marriageable' (that is economically stable) men" (p. 145).

The Truly Disadvantaged, in the tradition of *The Philadelphia Negro*, is a well-researched and often insightful work into the structural and demographic changes confronting poor Black communities. And while Wilson does not offer explicit normative judgments about the inherent deficiencies of poor Black people that other "underclass" scholars promote, he does question many of the assumed standards of respectability thought to be shared among enlightened and appropriate people, independent of race or class. For example, never in the text does Wilson fundamentally question the importance of, nor does he raise the possible negative consequences of, the dominant and imposed nuclear family structure. Never does he openly worry about the impact of strict gender relations on the lived experience of young Black males—no doubt some of them gay—at the center of his analysis. Moreover, never does he attempt to explore the creativity, adaptability and transformative possibilities that exist in the alternative family, intimate, and social relationships and behavior thought to distinguish the underclass. He never explores what Ted Gordon calls the "cultural range" of Black communities where "there appears a repertoire of practices and meanings which, when seen in relation to the dominant culture, extends from resistant to accommodative" (1997, p. 40).

For example, is it possible that the socialization of young boys to believe that they have not fulfilled their manly obligations unless they are able to provide for their families, means that young men who have no access to the low-skilled, high wage jobs of past years and thus no legal means of "providing" for their children, partners, and other family members decide to engage in dangerous and illegal activity to meet or appear to meet such norms? Furthermore, is it possible that traditional narratives of masculinity encourage men who are structurally unable to meet such ideas to detach from any engaged role with their children and partners? Similarly, is it possible that the shared care-taking strategies of young, single women with children, where both family and friends aid in the "raising" of children—often because

their help is required in light of limited resources—could help us better understand and appreciate the benefits to be gained from communal practices in child rearing?

I am not suggesting that norms of masculinity explain all of the counter normative behavior with regard to family structure that Wilson outlines in his book. I do believe, however, that we must examine such ideas, norms, and processes of socialization as both part of the cause and possible “solution” to these phenomena. In the same way that scholars develop and advocate new economic programs they believe will create living-wage jobs for both men and women who are under- and unemployed, so too must we explore and put forth new ways of defining and teaching what it is to be a contributing and healthy man or woman in this society and in Black communities. Structural interventions, while critically important, will never provide sufficient solutions to normative *and* structurally constituted crises.

Clearly Du Bois and Wilson do not represent the breadth of approaches and the body of literature that has developed on the Black poor. They do, however, represent the general complacency found among those who study such communities, leaving unexamined the normative structure that is used to pathologize certain choices and demonize specific communities. I offer their work as a lesson to us all about the instinctive move, even among some of our most dedicated and respected scholars, to judge and pathologize the lives of those most vulnerable in Black communities. At the root of such judgments sits an unexamined acceptance of normative standards of association, behavior, and even desire that limits our ability to respect the subjects under consideration and to explore their lived decisions with an eye toward its transformative and oppositional potential.

It would be disingenuous of me to suggest that those studying the Black poor have only engaged in the pathologizing of those communities. There is a contrasting literature on the Black poor that has explained their seemingly deviant behavior as reflecting the limited and adaptive choices of a marginalized group. Whether it is ethnographies like Carol Stack’s *All Our Kin* (1997) or Mitch Duneier’s *Slim’s Table* (1994), these works have stopped short of demonizing the actions of the Black poor, seeking instead to understand the reasons for such choices and the functions they serve. However, still left unexplored in these texts are the possibilities for broader and more radical transformation. No doubt the political potential of these acts is ignored, in part because the intent of these and other ethnographic studies is to detail what exists and offer reasoned explanations of why these patterns are maintained. Rarely is an ethnographic work focused on the question of what might be, especially in the political realm and especially beyond the neighborhood or community under study. Thus, because of past limitations in focus, question, and method, I believe a new focus on the relationship between deviant practice, discourse, and politics is necessary.

DEVIANCE, AGENCY, AUTONOMY, AND RESISTANCE

Throughout this article I have argued for a renewed focus on those acts of perceived deviance in Black communities, not to explain their functional or dysfunctional characteristics, but instead to investigate their potential for the production of counter normative behaviors and oppositional politics. As I stated earlier, I am interested in why individuals with little access to and protection from dominant power choose to engage in behaviors that are largely deemed, at least by dominant narratives, to be outside the realm of acceptable behavior. These choices can threaten or call into question one’s status within Black communities, but more often they jeopardize the formal standing of already marginal individuals in relation to the state.⁶ In addition to these individual acts of deviance, I am also interested in how deviant choices that

are repeated by groups or subgroups of people can create a space where normative myths of how the society is naturally structured are challenged in practice (the decision to have a baby before one is married) and in speech (the statement “I don’t need a man” by the same single mother). While I accept the warning of Dorian Warren that cumulative acts of individual agency are not the same as collective agency, I do believe that in this counter normative space exists the possibility of radical change, not only in the distribution of resources, but also definitional power, redefining the rules of normality that limit the dreams, emotions, and acts of most people.

Observing and probing the agency of people who, understanding the expectations of the larger society and their communities, choose differently from what is prescribed must be the point from which we start to build a new research agenda for African American Studies in general and the study of Black politics in particular. The centering of those most marginal in Black communities is, for me, the real work of queering Black studies. Using a theoretical framework closely associated with the commitments of Black feminists, queer theorists, and students of Black politics, where the counter normative behavior and marginal position of different segments of Black communities are highlighted, not with an eye not toward pathologizing or even justifying such behavior, but instead with an eye toward recognizing and understanding its possible subversive potential, we can reorient our respective fields to focus on the potential libratory aspects of deviance.

I am not suggesting that researchers ignore the deviant positioning of the choices and behaviors of individuals relative to normative standards. In fact, it is their diminished position that makes such choices in part worthy of study. My hope, however, is that our research not stop there, merely noting their deviant status and the seemingly self-destructive “nature” of such acts. Instead, I am suggesting that we also explore why people believe they made these decisions; did they understand, expect, and experience negative consequences from these choices; and does such behavior demonstrate some degree of agency on the part of marginalized individuals that can be mobilized for more explicitly political goals? These deviant choices, which are by no means chosen freely in the liberal sense, have the ability to help us delineate the relationship between agency, autonomy, and opposition that has been missing in many of our most insightful analyses of oppositional politics by oppressed people.

Specifically, I hypothesize that many of the acts labeled resistance by scholars of oppositional politics have not been attempts at resistance at all, but instead the struggle of those most marginal to maintain or regain some agency in their lives as they try to secure such human rewards as pleasure, fun, and autonomy. In no way is this statement meant to negate the political potential to be found in such behavior. It does underscore, however, my stance that the work marginal people pursue to find and protect some form of autonomy is not inherently politicized work and the steps leading from autonomy to resistance must be detailed and not assumed. We must begin to delineate the conditions under which transgressive behavior becomes transformative and deviant practice is transformed into politicized resistance.

For example, Jim Scott in both the *Weapons of the Weak* (1987) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) implores the reader to look beyond the public transcript of formal interactions between the dominant and those much less powerful to understand the full range of political acts of resistance being pursued by those dominated. Scott writes:

Until quite recently, much of the active political life of subordinate groups has been ignored because it takes place at a level we rarely recognize as political. To emphasize the enormity of what has been, by and large, disregarded, I want to

distinguish between the open, declared forms of resistance, which attract most attention, and the disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance that constitutes the domain of infrapolitics . . .

Taking a long historical view, one sees that the luxury of relatively safe, open political opposition is both rare and recent . . . So long as we confine our conception of the *political* to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes (1990, pp. 198–199).

Similarly, Robin Kelley in *Race Rebels* (1994) argues that if we expand where we look for political acts and what counts as politics, one can find numerous everyday acts of resistance in the lives of “ordinary” people. Extending this line of reasoning, Kelley argues that independent of the intended effect, marginal people can and do resist daily, through acts ranging from the outright challenge to those in power to participation in cultural forms thought to be deviant. He writes:

Like Scott, I use the concept of infrapolitics to describe the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements. I am not suggesting that the realm of infrapolitics is any more or less important or effective than what we traditionally understand to be politics. Instead I want to suggest that the political history of oppressed people cannot be understood without reference to infrapolitics, for these daily acts have a cumulative effect on power relations. While the meaning and effectiveness of various acts differ according to the particular circumstances, they do make a difference, *whether intended or not* (p. 8, emphasis added).

While I, too, believe that an expanded frame for recognizing resistance or more generally political acts would reveal daily examples of what Scott calls infrapolitics, I worry that both Scott and Kelley collapse important and necessary distinctions that exist in the choices and intent of those labeled marginal and deviant. Specifically, while I believe that some choices that are labeled deviant such as the choice to live one’s life as an out gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer person may be driven by a conscious intentionality to resist the heteronormativity of the society and the second-class position of gay subjects, surely not all acts of deviance are examples of politicized resistance to either larger or local manifestations of domination and oppression. Some acts labeled deviant are defiant in nature, where individuals make a conscious decision to go against established rules either publicly or through hidden means. However, every counter normative defiant act is not political, either in intent, result, or both, where political resistance is the intent to defy laws, interactions, obligations, and normative assumptions viewed as systematically unfair. Thus, one of the significant challenges facing scholars is to determine how to differentiate deviant practice, defiance and resistance.

It is the distinction I make among deviance, defiance, and resistance and the significant role I assign to *intent* in marking politicized resistance that I believe helps us to build on the important insights provided by Scott and Kelley while offering more analytic precision to our efforts to identify and understand the political potential contained in deviant behavior. Again, I am not suggesting that Scott and Kelley do not recognize the difference between, for example, cultural expression and political resistance, but in their writings there exists less clarity about the boundaries

between these categories. For example, in describing the work and pleasure of “dance halls, blues clubs and ‘jook joints’” in the South, Kelley writes,

In darkened rooms ranging in size from huge halls to tiny dens, black working people of both sexes shook and twisted their overworked bodies, drank, talked, engaged in sexual play, and—in spite of occasional fights—reinforced their sense of community. . .

I am not suggesting that parties, dances, and other leisure pursuits were merely guises for political events, or that these cultural practices were clear acts of resistance. Instead, much if not most of African American popular culture can be characterized as, to use Raymond Williams’s terminology, “alternative” rather than oppositional. Most people attend those events to escape from the world of assembly lines, relief lines, and color lines, and to leave momentarily the individual and collective battles against racism, sexism and material deprivation. . . .

Knowing what happens in these spaces of pleasure can help us understand the solidarity black people have shown at political mass meetings, illuminate the bonds of fellowship one finds in churches and voluntary associations, and unveil the *conflicts* across class and gender lines that shape and constrain these collective struggles (pp. 46–47).

Again, while I agree with Kelley’s call to study nontraditional sites of social gathering in Black communities, it is his claims about the creation of communal bonds in social spaces that transfer to more explicitly political and civic formations that I believe demand greater elaboration and empirical investigation. I hypothesize that most acts labeled deviant or even defiant of power are not attempts to sway fundamentally the distribution of power in the country or even permanently change the allocation of power among the individuals involved in an interaction. Instead, these acts, decisions, or behaviors are more often attempts to create greater autonomy over one’s life, to pursue desire, or to make the best of very limited life options. Thus, instead of attempting to increase one’s power *over* someone, people living with limited resources may use the restricted agency available to them to create autonomous spaces absent the continuous stream of power *from* outside authorities or normative structures. And while an act of defiance can be misinterpreted as having political intent and a direct challenge to the distribution of power and may result in the actual redistribution of power, I would contend that the initial act was not one of resistance. Thus, understanding the distinction between deviance, defiant acts, and acts of resistance lies in recognizing the perspective or intent of the individual. It is my emphasis on understanding intent as it relates to the agency of marginal individuals where I believe I part ways with Kelley and Scott.

I want to be clear. I am not suggesting that acts somehow deemed as deviant or defiant have no relationship to the category of acts I label resistance or are devoid of political consequence. Instead, I am suggesting that such acts cannot be read as resistance independent of some understanding of the intent and agency of the individual. While there may be political possibilities in the deviant or defiant acts of marginally positioned people, that potential has to be mobilized in a conscious fashion to be labeled resistance. This distinction is not arbitrary, but one that signals the need for intervening mechanisms to transform deviant and defiant behavior into politically conscious acts that can be used as a point of entry into a mobilized political movement. Of course, the following question logically is what type of intervening mechanisms are necessary? While I believe there exists multiple possibilities of effective interventions, from a relatively traditional approach to politics, one such intervention might be an

increase in the number of grassroots organizations focused on talking to and organizing young people, including the so-called “deviants” of Black communities. For example, organizers that will listen to the stories of young people, who can relate to the cultural vehicles of this group, who recognize the counter normative potential that exists in their non-traditional living and sexual arrangements and who can aid in developing and articulating a political agenda that speaks to their lived condition are one example of an intervening mechanism I would recommend. In fact, some of the most interesting political work around the country is happening among organizations trying to mobilize those segments of society too often deemed deviants—young people who are unemployed, not in school and possibly struggling with children, people incarcerated and now reentering their communities, and undocumented workers.

Unfortunately, too often scholars concerned with the politics of marginal communities have ignored the distinction of defiant or resistant acts and acts of politicized resistance, misdiagnosing the resources that exist and the resources needed for political mobilization. It might be that marginal subjects with a politicized consciousness choose localized attempts at control and autonomy because they have no mobilized outlet to confront the larger political context. Or they reject politics because they believe that the mobilized organizations that do exist have no interest in and commitment to the issues that animate their lives; those disrespectable life and death issues in hiding in Black communities. These are empirical questions waiting for study.

It is possible that eventually the cumulative impact of individual deviant choices may indeed have an effect on power relations as Kelley suggests, creating spaces or counter publics, where not only oppositional ideas and discourse happen, but lived opposition, or at least autonomy, is chosen daily. And through the repetition of deviant practices by multiple individuals, new identities, communities, values, and politics may be created where seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior was thought to exist. And to go one long step further, it might also be that in those counter normative choices lie the seeds for challenging many of the normative structures that have defined some in Black communities as deviant. Thus, it is possible that through deviant choices individuals open up a space where public defiance of the norms is seen as a possibility and an oppositional worldview develops. But again, while this newly created space of autonomy and difference may in fact change the incentive and norm structure for that subgroup, the original choice was not one of resistance even if the continued practice of deviant behavior has long-lasting political consequences. Of course, this example suggests that intended political resistance is not the only way to achieve political results, although it may be a necessary and effective component to protect and maintain newly created spaces and norms. My instinctive move toward collective mobilization leads me to believe that the modeling of public defiance and the opening up of new counter normative space is not enough. Organizations, networks, and groups have to be mobilized that will engage those making deviant decisions in a sustained discussion about opposition, agency, and norms in and out of Black communities. Consciousness must be raised as processes and institutions of regulation are exposed.

CONCLUSION

It is my belief that a new focus on those previously understood as deviant in Black communities opens up important research questions for social scientists, different from the work of earlier scholars like Du Bois, reflecting the changing political and racial landscape of the twenty-first century. The benefit of a new approach to Black politics with a focus on deviance is not that we arrive at some unexamined position of support for every counter normative and seemingly self-destructive behavior that exists in Black

communities. Instead, at its best, questions about the construction of Black deviance should lead us first to an engagement with the normative assumptions that structure Black politics and the lives of Black people, interrogating whose rule-breaking will be labeled deviant, altering significantly their political, social, and economic standing.

Second, a focus on deviance, different from Du Bois's attempt to mask those seen as culturally inferior, should lead to the inclusion of previously silenced and absent members of our communities, expanding our understanding of who constitutes Black communities and reconstructing the boundaries of membership and identity. This means that we must pay attention to power within our communities, something Black feminists have demanded for some time. For me this is the process of the queering of Black studies; making visible all those who in the past have been silenced and excluded as full members of Black communities—the poor, women, lesbians and gays—those people on the margins of society and excluded from the middle-class march toward respectability. But we must remember that reconstituting and expanding the membership of Black communities is not enough, we must also understand and detail the work of power that constructs and disseminates the idea of outsider or deviant within and outside of Black communities.

Third, a centering of deviance should also generate new theories and models of power, agency, and resistance in the lives of largely marginal people, cognizant of the different intents involved in defiant acts and acts of politicized resistance. Despite my disagreement with some of his analysis, I see the work of Robin Kelley, in particular in *Race Rebels*, as taking on this charge in exceptional fashion, providing the reader with a much more complicated understanding of the work, politics, and leisure habits of the Black working class. Kelley attempts to demonstrate how behavior previously deemed as deviant, decadent, or even self-destructive was driven in part by a politics of resistance or infrapolitics as James Scott has labeled such processes. While I believe that both Kelley and Scott at times see and impose an oppositional motive in the lives of the poor and oppressed where it does not exist, I hold both scholars in very high esteem for their attempt to interrogate the assumptions of what constitutes resistance, opposition, and agency, broadening how we think about politics and the possibility for transformational politics from below.

Fourth, a focus on acts of deviance in Black communities should also direct our attention to the power and oppression being imposed on Black lives from structures and institutions outside of Black communities. We must all remember that the normative categories of “respectable” and “deviant” have significant political consequences beyond the academy in determining one's access to needed resources. If we take, for example, the idea of the family, specifically the ideal of the nuclear family, we find its continued prominence or at least one's conformity to it, as a standard in determining the distribution of political, economic, and social resources. Not too unlike the policing of intimate relationships of women on welfare by caseworkers in the 1960s and 1970s, there has emerged a new commitment on the part of the government to compulsory marriage among the poor.

Anyone familiar with the Bush administration's policies toward women's reproductive rights both here and abroad has seen up close the use of normative ideals of the family and the “unborn child” to structure a policy agenda. The promotion of fatherhood programs and paternity requirements that seek to tie funding for the poor to being married is now a common standard by which agencies and organizations are judged with regard to funding. Even President Bush's recently passed AIDS initiative to provide money to treat AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean was stalled in Congress as other conservatives sought to restrict HIV and AIDS prevention and education funds from those international organizations and agencies providing inte-

grated family planning—including counseling around abortion. Continually, the Bush administration has used family structure as a litmus test for the allocation of needed resources both here and abroad. In line with this move have been efforts to restrict everything from head start to welfare assistance based on conformity to the nuclear family structure.

However, the diminished political status of those defined as deviant is not only the result of right-wing politics. As I noted earlier, within established Black political organizations there is also reluctance to embrace those issues and subpopulations thought to be morally wanting or ambiguous (Warren 2000). Despite the feelings of some in Black communities that we have been shamed by the immoral behavior of a small subset of our community, some would label the underclass, scholars must take up the charge to highlight and detail the agency of those on the outside, those who through their acts of nonconformity choose outsider status, at least temporarily. It is an intentional deviance given limited agency and constrained choices. These individuals are not fully or completely defining themselves as outsiders or content with their outsider status, but they are also not willing to adapt completely or conform. The cumulative impact of such choices is possibly the creation of spaces or counter publics, where not only oppositional ideas and discourse happens, but lived opposition, or at least autonomy, is chosen daily. Furthermore, it may be that through the repetition of deviant practices by multiple individuals new identities, communities, and politics are created and a space emerges where seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior might evolve into conscious acts of resistance that serve as the basis for a mobilized politics of deviance. Only through serious and sustained examination can we begin to understand what is possible through deviance. I hope that this new space of possibility is at the center of studies of Black politics in the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

1. This paper was originally prepared for the conference “The Ends of Sexuality: Pleasure and Danger in the New Millennium” Northwestern University, April 4–5, 2003. My thinking has evolved since its first inception because of the helpful comments of Brandi Adams, Alan Brady, Michael Dawson, Victoria Hattam, Sheldon Lyke, Patchen Markell, Barbara Ransby, Beth Richie, Dorian Warren, Deva Woodly, Iris Marion Young, and the participants of the University of Texas, Center for African and African American Studies’ Race, Gender, and Sexuality Series. Of course, any and all shortcomings in the argument and the article are the responsibility of the author.
2. I am lucky to be a part of an amazing community of scholars in Chicago committed to the development of a field of research we might call Black queer studies. Some of the members of this intellectual and social family include Jennifer Brody, Jackie Goldsby, Sharon Holland, Lynette Jackson, E. Patrick Johnson, Waldo Johnson, Dwight McBride, Darrel Moore, and Beth Richie.
3. The recent revelations of mixed race children by racist and prominent White men such as Thomas Jefferson and Strom Thurmond as well as the recent hysteria of purported “down-low” sexual behavior by some unknown number of Black men underscores the possible disjuncture between one’s expressed public and lived private sexual behavior and power.
4. See for example, the work of Tricia Rose (2003); E. Frances White (2001); Jennifer DeVere Brody (2000); Dwight McBride (1998); Philip Brian Harper (1998); Kendal Thomas (1997); and Siobhan Somerville (1994) and Ann DuCille (1990).
5. Throughout the paper when I use the term deviant I am referring to those groups of people who have been constructed as engaging in substantial rule or norm-breaking

behavior, whose counter-normative social behavior is attributed not only to individual choice but to deficiencies in their fundamental or inherent character, making such behavior predictable or inevitable. Among such individuals, deviant behavior in one social realm, such as in the composition of family, is seen as connected to deviant behavior in other realms, such as norms around work. I am not talking about, for example, individuals who have a pattern of rolling through stop signs instead of coming to a complete stop—rule-breaking behavior. Instead, I am focused in this paper on those individuals thought to break the assumed agreed upon norms of socially acceptable behavior. See, for example, Becker 1973 for an extended discussion of deviance.

6. It is important here to note that normative structures around such essential ideas as family, work or sex can vary between their macro or dominant articulation and their micro, group-based articulation and practice. Thus, having children before one is married may result in harsh consequences from the state with regard to financial support for example, but be largely accepted and seemingly embraced in Black communities.

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