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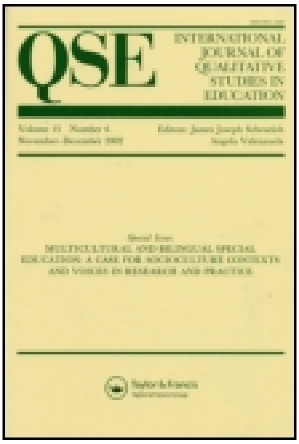

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LGBTQ street youth talk back: a meditation on resistance and witnessing

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In this ethnography of LGBTQ street youth, I argue that despite the regulation and containment of their bodies, queer street youth consistently create spaces of resistance that move them away from the tropes of infection, contamination, and deservedness that are inscripted onto the bodies of queer youth. Using the work of feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, this essay articulates a framework for resistance researchers – scholars who enact a "faithful witnessing" in solidarity with the communities they are describing, a movement away from the radical othering that often happens in social science research. It is in this positioning as a faithful witness that researchers can attend to the deconstruction of the discursive climates of deficit tropes that obscure the gestures and maneuvers of resistance. The tropes of contamination and irresponsibility intersect many of the experiences of LGBTQ street youth in ways that implicate not only LGBTQ street youth, but also other marginalized bodies.

Keywords: LGBTQ youth; resistance; witnessing; urban ethnography; intersectionality

Introduction

A group of LGBTQ street youth are standing on the corner of a major intersection in a large metropolitan city, dressed in discarded clothing, boys wearing shiny blue dresses and girls in heavy leather boots, dresses torn and cut up the side to show a little leg and thin shoulders. Drivers jammed in 5 o'clock traffic honk their horns at them, only to find themselves and their cars surrounded by the young collective, quickly trying to roll their windows up once they find themselves captive in the late afternoon traffic. I watch from the metrobus I am riding home and I wonder what bothers these drivers about the homeless queer youth. Was it that the youth who were "read" as homeless might ask these drivers for spare change? Do they think they are in danger of getting car-jacked by those whom the drivers perceive as homeless "criminals," many of them young gay men of color? Or maybe the youth are recognized as queer. Did these drivers roll up their windows in fear of contamination and infection? Or is the confrontation too early in the afternoon, when these drivers might cruise the boulevard late at night, looking for these same young men and women under different circumstances?

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Discourses of race, sexuality, and class are inscribed upon the queer and brown body in ways that contain and restrain, concealing how systems of power have privileged the kinds of narratives that invalidate and undermine other more local and/or transgressive meanings and identities (Cruz 2001; Saavedra and Nymark 2008). These intersections of power and oppression are particularly illuminating and provide spaces where education researchers can begin to analyze how power articulates itself around and through the axis of class, race, gender, and sexuality. For queer street youth of color, the discourses of homelessness, criminalization, and contamination are prominent narratives that dictate how teachers, police, social workers, and the medical establishment approach and engage with them. Yet even as the queer brown body is made legible in the violence of many of these narratives, I find that the youth in this research frequently "talk back," demanding acknowledgment from the public, a desire to be "seen" and recognized. For queer street youth, talking back begins with the body resisting the tropes of criminalization and contamination that are often assigned to them, refusing the oppressive narratives with the smallest of gestures – a movement of the hands, the coded languages, a body rigid with fear – often responding to multiple and often intersecting oppressions (Collins 2000).

In this essay I am proposing that it is in this intersection of oppression, where race fuses with poverty and homophobia, where oppression is not only interrelated but is intermeshed and bound together by the social relations of domination and capitalism, where we may recognize LGBTQ youth resistance in the smallest of spaces. The "talking back" begins as queer youth resist the tropes of criminalization and contamination that are often assigned to their bodies. This "seeing" and acknowledging of resistance requires new roles for researchers, as *Bridge* feminists assert that when we refuse to do the work to analyze these intersections that may be unequal, one-sided, or even woven together simultaneously, this space of multiple oppressions, we lose the LGBTQ student of color, we make invisible the lesbian of color, and we fail to see the undocumented queer youth who are leading the resistance against racist legislation such as SB1070 in Arizona.

Positioning ourselves as resistance researchers

Researchers in these spaces must be able to enact what feminist philosopher Maria Lugones (2003, 7) describes, to "sense resistance, interpret behavior as resistant even if it is dangerous," the ability to see and acknowledge resistance in these tight spaces.[1] The re-positioning of educational research requires a deliberate turn to acknowledge agency and movement in places where youth may have little room for maneuvering. The danger Lugones refers to surfaces in several ways. We acknowledge that this "talking back" of subjects in a political climate of retribution is dangerous, particularly if your subjects tell you stories that challenge the nation's investments in policies that are based on the free market. It may be that the position taken by a researcher who looks for resistance is questioned and dismissed by others who are more invested in the role of the neutral, logico-scientific observer and the positivist reliability of the data. It could be personally dangerous for a researcher who offers a reading of events and experiences that goes against the official versions of the police, doctors, or social workers, forcing you to develop different kinds of commitments in the field. These different alliances may also be dangerous as they force you to rethink our training as social scientists and how we may unintentionally become complicit in the repression of communities represented in our own research.

Building upon these issues, resistance researchers must learn to recognize the differing levels of disruption that may happen when we look at our work from the inside-out, when we re-focus our attention not "on" or "at" subjects, but "with" and "from" them. It is about creating new roles for the researcher, the teacher, and the student, roles that refuse to collaborate on the side of power, what Lugones states as:

> ... providing ways of witnessing faithfully and of conveying meaning against the oppressive grain. To witness faithfully is difficult, given the manyness of worlds of sense related through power so that oppressive and fragmenting meanings saturate many worlds of sense in hard to detect ways. A collaborator witnesses on the side of power, while a faithful witness witnesses against the grain of power, on the side of resistance. (7)

Witnessing faithfully requires researchers to develop literacies that are differential, the ability to read and produce meaning across "many worlds of sense." The development of ways of being and of "being at ease" (Lugones 1987, 12) in multiple worlds is not only about engaging with difference in ways that are not about "cultural competencies," but is about the recognition and a rejection of this radical othering that often happens in social science research.

An ethnography of the queer brown body

This ethnography has no "proper names" due to IRB restrictions with the vulnerable subject of the "unaccompanied minor" and is completely anonymous. Two sites were used for interviewing and public and participant observations. The first site is an alternative school in a large urban community that services the educational needs of LGBTQ youth who have dropped or been pushed out of their comprehensive public schools. Approximately 50 students attend classes at this site and the school district categorizes the space as a drop-out prevention program and is funded with little more than teacher salaries and a small supplies budget. The second site is a large multiple service LGBTQ youth drop-in center in the same urban community, just a few blocks away from the alternative school. This drop-in center is open from 9 am to 11 pm, and provides showers, a laundry room, meal programs, art and dance classes, a television room, HIV testing, rap groups, and a staff of caseworkers. Services at this site are limited to youth 21 years of age or younger.

A series of structured and open interviews were conducted with the young people who fit these criteria:

- Youth must have experienced homelessness (as defined in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [42 USC 11434a]) for at least one night in the past six months.
- Youth must be between the ages of 14–21.
- Youth must self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.

Eligibility was determined through a quick demographic screening prior to any interview. Young people who were deemed eligible for the study were then read an oral consent form. The entire process of data collection and coding is anonymous. No names, places, or information connecting the subjects with the data were asked at any time. Participants were compensated with a phone card and meal vouchers to local fast food restaurants. An equitable inclusion of both men and women (and otherly gendered youth) between the ages of 14–21 from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds was recruited. The cut-off age for participants was between 14 (ninth graders) and 21 (the maximum age for services at both the alternative school and the drop-in center). An In Vivo protocol was used to theme and code data (Saldana 2008), then analyzed through a framework of interpretive interactionalism (Denzin 2001).

Field notes and analytic memos complemented my data collection, where I recorded public observations and short, fragmented narratives that I describe as "ethnographic snapshots" – intense bursts of information that in very few words tell us so much about the daily conditions of LGBTQ youth in the city. I compiled 35 urban testimonials, defined as: "authentic narrative(s), told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of the situation (war, revolution, oppression). Emphasizing popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as a representative of a collective memory and identity" (Yudice 1991, 16). Often these fragmented narratives are all we have of youth experiences, inexpressible, a little bit of their time compiled, but a short testimony of the daily conditions of their lives.

It is important to note that my role as researcher and as a lesbian of color is implicated in the collecting of the youth *testimonios*. I am experienced as a literature teacher and an HIV educator and have maintained my relationships with the youth and their teachers through my volunteering at the LGBTQ alternative school and in my work with a large social service agency addressing the needs of the homeless youth community in this city. My training as an HIV educator gave me the skills to observe and quickly access information that young people are offering, thus my approach to the data comes from multiple spaces, differential, and experiential. Villenas (1996), Brayboy and Deyhle (2000), and Collins (1986) in their challenges to traditional social science methodologies offer openings for critical and decolonizing ways to position ourselves as researchers of color, in standpoints that help us recognize these gestures of resistance. My analysis, then, is multi-layered and interdisciplinary, reflecting my worldview as a queer Chicana ethnographer.

The tropes of responsibility, deservedness, and contamination

In the classrooms where I taught, I was looking for resistance during this era of assault on public education, what Henry Giroux (2003) states as the, "growing preponderance of a free market economy and corporate culture that turns everything it touches into an object of consumption" (8). In 2009 and 2010 California schools erupted with walk-outs, teach-ins, and student organizing. Young people were beginning to recognize the sway that free-market ideologies and policies have over public schools and as Giroux suggests, that one of the very few kinds of citizenship offered to students is consumerism:

> More than ever the crisis of schooling represents, at large, the crisis of democracy itself and any attempt to understand the attack on public schooling and higher education cannot be separated from the wider assault on all forms of public life not driven by the logic of the market. (7)

But public life is consistently being reduced to market logics and tropes of "deservedness." How often do we read in newspapers or hear the media's stories of how much a homeless man or woman or an undocumented child costs the nation? Similar tropes of responsibility inscribe the teenage mother and those infected with the HIV virus. Responsibility, in this instance, is coupled with the notion of squandering public funds for an unwed mother and her child, and the medical costs associated with the long-term care of a person with AIDS. They are both described as unwanted costs to the state. In these ways, queer street youth are also part of this discourse of deservedness and denied the benefits of full citizenship. The call by neo-conservative politicians to reform the 14th Amendment rescinding the citizenship of US-born children of undocumented immigrants reinforces this logic of the market – these undocumented bodies, like homeless bodies, are presented as a sum-loss to the nation, no matter how the undocumented labor and pay taxes into Medicare and Social Security programs that they will never be able to access.

The trope of irresponsibility

In multiple, often fragmentary, and conflicting ways we struggle with understanding poverty, AIDS, and other discourses of coloniality and capitalism that are inscribed onto our bodies (Cruz 2001; Cruz and McLaren 2002). Discourses that surround terms such as homelessness, AIDS, or even the narratives of the "inner city" are linguistic constructions that are foundational in their support of the cognitive requirements of a neo-liberal project (Sassure 1972; Leung 1995). The language of neo-liberalism, conveniently contained in easy-to-digest media "soundbites," works in tandem with policy and legislative changes that undermine funding and community support for public schools, social services, and other public works.[2] Scapegoats such as Mexican immigrants, single mothers, students of color, and people with AIDS are those who carry the brunt of public indignation and are equated with policies and procedures that respond to the crisis of the moment and deny and discontinue services for those who are most needy, with a media that continues to create and further support what Pillow (2004) names as the "discursive climate" of the state. These equations are configured within this social, political, economic, and moral climate that creates distinctive meanings for these narratives and are applied differentially by race, class, gender, and sexual identity. A discursive climate not only linguistically and ideologically constructs the queer homeless body, but also shapes the interpretation and engagement of how medical and other social service policies are enacted for these youth. Even in lesbian and gay communities such as San Francisco's Castro District, in their rush to oppose and veto plans for a homeless shelter for LGBTQ street youth, the dominant discourses of "deservedness" and NIMBY thinking continue this dis-engagement with street youth, out of sight, out of mind.[3]

The trope of contamination

One narrative that LGBTQ youth struggle with is that gay men, and lesbians by default, equal infection and contamination. Whether practicing safe or unprotected sex, the sexual behaviors of gay men, and by proxy, lesbian women, bisexual, transgendered, and other queered identities, are still deemed to be infectious, contaminating, and maliciously irresponsible. Sexual behaviors that fall outside normative heterosexual reproduction are perceived as dirty or unhygienic. "The purpose of the body," as Rafael Campos (1997) learns in his medical residency, is "healthful reproduction, and a relentless self control over its processes and smallest environments was the only business of life," where gay or lesbian or other non-reproductive sex is pathologized, evoking what one medical researcher states as "the due penalty of their error."[4] Restraint is key here as the sexual politics of the Radical Right (of abstinence, anti-choice, pro-family, and "responsibility" discourse) organizes a discursive climate of punitive, reactionary, and exclusionary policies and practices that place blame on teenage mothers and welfare queens, LGBTQ youth, people with AIDS, and folks who practice non-reproductive forms of sexual behavior (Cohen 1997; Pillow 2004). This backlash against the poor, the colored, and the queer undergirds policy such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act and other defundings of the social infrastructure. Control of women's reproduction and non-reproductive sexual behaviors is to maintain strict containment of "messy," dirty, and addictive consumption of sexual pleasure – a fear of women and girl's sexuality, a panic surrounding the perceived disintegration of the American family – a ruse to distract our attentions from the economic disparities of income in the US. In essence, the discursive climates that make it our lack of restraint and containment of our bodies, quite literally the body inscribed as "messy texts," where these narratives of AIDS, contamination, and infection become embodied and internalized, interrupting a more critical understanding of the situations at hand.

What is consistent in many of these dominant narratives is the premise that the individual is responsible for her own recklessness, or infection, medicalization, or even her own state of poverty. One recent example of this was reported in a 2010 *New York Times* article, "Gay Men Condemn Blood Ban as Biased," describing the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) continued ban of donations of blood by gay men.[5] Despite new technologies that are much more accurate in detecting HIV and other infectious diseases in blood and the support of the medical and research communities for the lifting of the ban against gay men, the FDA refused to repeal the restrictions from the 1983 mandate against blood donations from gay men. The trope of the contaminated, negligently infected blood operates to further support the FDA's decision, keeping intact the discursive climate of the infected queer in federal policy. It is these narratives of tainted blood and "contamination" that mark LGBTQ bodies, including youth bodies, in ways that police, doctors, and medical personnel interpret, assess, and act upon. One story from my field notes describes the response from EMTs to a young African American transgendered girl:

> "Girl's been up for a week," says one young drag queen, "thinks it ain't gonna' bite her in the ass. Hummph. It's what you get," but we ignore her. The ambulance drives up and two paramedics take a look at Clarissa.[6] I tell them a little of what happened in the past half-hour. But they question her roughly – "Are you on Viagra? Is that what you are on? Or are you tweaking, kid? How much Viagra have you had? You fucked up, kid."
>
> The paramedics take her vitals, her readings show irregular blood pressure and an extremely high pulse rate – near 160s – like she had just ran a 100 yard sprint. The paramedics bring out a stretcher, strap her in, and wheel her out to the ambulance, where by now there is a crowd and a fire truck nearby. Clarissa looks scared and anxious. Another young transgender woman tells her: "Look at that. You such a diva that they had to announce with sirens that you weren't feeling good." Clarissa tries to laugh. I ask where they are taking her but they don't know, probably county, maybe

> [local community hospital]. Depends on what's the priority, they tell me. Every hospital is full today, said the other paramedic. I wonder what the priority is for an African American transgender street kid. (Cruz 2006, 98–9)

In this field note, paramedics brusquely assess the medical condition of Clarissa, a transgendered street youth, quickly interpreting her vital signs to be drug-induced. The chances of contacting HIV increases dramatically with the use of methamphetamines and is one of the biggest health risks for LGBTQ youth.[7] Drug use, in this encounter between youth and EMTs, is equated with recklessness – "you fucked up, kid" – coupled with an evaluation of the "priority" of the youth in order to receive medical attention. Help comes with a cost and Clarissa knows that she has endangered herself, yet it is the lack of empathy from the paramedics and even some of her friends that is so jarring, ascribing all agency in the situation to her alone.

It might be that Clarissa is receiving less attentive care because she is a transgendered woman and a meth user. But it is another LGBTQ youth who quickly changes the script from the cool and almost detached paramedics to the crowd of LGBTQ youth surrounding Clarissa into a space of caring and solidarity and humor – "you such a diva they had to announce with sirens that you weren't feeling good" – where Clarissa's ally stands in and speaks out for her, refusing the dehumanizing treatment from the paramedics. The gesture changes the meaning of the ambulance siren, not one of a potential overdose, but a reframing that announces that a "diva" is in trouble. There is a life here that needs our caring attention. Resistance, in the face of unrelenting homophobia, is only possible in this example through collective agency. In this instant, the invisible social and cultural world of LGBTQ street youth emerges in this "talking back," a response made not in reaction to the paramedics, but outside of the frame of containment and regulation, an instance of faithful witnessing. Maybe this talking back doesn't reach the ears of the EMTs, but it does reach Clarissa, who acknowledges this gesture of solidarity despite the hostility around her.

The enactment of the "change of script" by the LGBTQ youth, the "talking back" is part of the everyday forms of resistance that queer youth cultivate. There is a danger to misreading these gestures that privilege these tropes of deservedness, that keep LGBTQ street youth as victims, without agency, silenced. Maybe these responses are unorganized, unplanned, even involuntary, yet our recognition of the resistance in these tight spaces belies a history of often hostile negotiations and struggle waged by LGBTQ youth everyday. The recent spate of LGBTQ youth suicides speaks mightily of the struggles that queer youth encounter daily and is a huge admonishment of the rampant racism, sexism, and homophobia that is allowed to happen in public schools. Without a critical deconstruction of the tropes surrounding LGBTQ identities, researchers will be unable to detect these maneuvers that refuse the logic of domination, gestures that viewed together, help us sense how these interruptions of the tropes of deservedness and responsibility woven together create a patchwork of resistance. Until we recognize how these larger tropes shape our attentions away from LGBTQ youth agency, no schools will ever be safe for queer, questioning, or differently-gendered youth.

Resistance in tight spaces

> I have tended, instead, to find activity in the movements of the hand, of someone rendered frozen by acts of extreme violation. (Lugones 2003, 5)

At what point does action count as political? In my ethnography of LGBTQ street youth, I learned to read the subtle signs of their identities – the small rainbow bracelets, the body language between students, a movement of the hands, the coded languages – wherein the body became sign. To perform gender differently or to mark the body in ways that suggested a rejection of hetero-normality was risky in this urban metropolis yet I found the signs of this opposition in almost every classroom, signs of what may be positive articulations of a new center created by LGBTQ youth. I learned to read students for those small acts of re-centering and sometimes resistance. Maria Lugones (2003) suggests that some actions or gestures are more recognizable as political as it is "afforded a kind of sociality" (2), one that forces us to develop different kinds of relationships in the field. As educators we must learn to recognize these differing levels of disruption, recognize and create new roles as educators, new roles that refuse to collaborate on the side of power.

The threat of HIV and other often violent experiences that defined the conditions of being LGBTQ youth and homeless in the city often left its marks on a body – sunburns from exposure, cracked and bleeding heels from having your shoes stolen, or the small purple lesion of Kaposi's sarcoma[8] on the back of the neck. These were signs I recognized specific to what LGBTQ street youth were experiencing as they navigate large urban spaces. I often thought of this set of observational and intuitive skills as a form of a literacy of the streets:

> I was walking home from a local bus stop and I see a young man (white male age 17) I know from the youth center. His head is bowed and he is sitting patiently on a bus bench, long arms stretched out in front. I recognize him and I walk up and say hello and see how he is, does he need anything, a bus token, a referral? He turns to me and smiles, a mouth filled with teeth rotted to the gum line, a mouth filled with stumps of what once was his teeth. (Cruz 2006, 8)

In this vignette, the painful erosion of enamel from this young man's teeth told a story of neglect and substance abuse to the point where he had difficulty talking. The drug's effects, what young people name as "meth mouth," include the ability to stay awake for hours, the suppression of your appetite, and a loss of inhibitions that may lead to risky sexual behavior. The pain of the slow disintegration of a young man's teeth in some ways reflects how easily youth slip through a broken welfare system. Simply attributing this young man's health to a discourse of "deservedness"[9] underscores how the simultaneity of being homeless and queer needs to be further grounded in the social relations that frame this difficult experience. Larger tropes of responsibility that blame youth for their own health and welfare obscure our ability to recognize and read for resistance.

Refusing the logic of domination

When I was young, I was often called names that I didn't understand. *Jota. Maricona.* Lezzie. I knew this language was used to describe a "thing" – something abnormal or less-than-human. I didn't understand the meanings behind these expletives but knew their emotional force and intent. But I refused to allow those terms to define me. I knew that this "thing" they named was not me. I understood later that I needed to develop my own subjectivity(ies) that are not part of the brutal alternatives that I am offered as a queer Chicana – to form identities and subject positions outside of the binaries of the colonized/colonizer and slave/master, to respond not because of the names I was called as I walked home from school, but to respond from a different place that is not “me” versus “them.” When Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes that she, “made the choice to be queer… It’s an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts… It makes for the *loqueria*, the crazies” (19), here are in-between spaces, the liminal, *los intersticios*, the tight spaces of our positionalities. Anzaldúa is forced to respond outside of a Western binary, able to form what Lugones names as, “intentions that are not part of the alternatives that are possible in the world in which they are brutalized and oppressed,” surviving in this space betwixt and between:

> And if “you” (always abstracted “you”) are one of the dominated, your movements are highly restricted and contained. And there may not be any you there under certain descriptions, such as “lesbian” or any other description that captures transgression. (Lugones 2003, 9)

Youth’s early resistances often come from experiences refusing the logic of domination, refusing language that inferiorizes, dehumanizes. The actions and movements of the young, queer, homeless, African American and hungry, are almost completely contained, scrutinized, and regulated. There are other descriptors forced upon them – “punk,” “faggot,” “dyke” – because maybe the language of transgression has not been made available to youth at home or in schools or even through the media. Surely few school districts have endorsed gay, lesbian or transgendered histories or literatures to be taught – curriculums that could offer another kind of citizenship for students. But because LGBTQ histories and literatures are made invisible, each young person must reinvent the wheel, beginning all over again the search for language, histories of transgression, resistance and even revolution, to help describe and inform their experiences forward. The work of reclaiming queer histories, narratives and literatures, in the recognition and acknowledgment that LGBTQ communities, in particular LGBTQ communities of color, have and continue to “talk back” and resist being silenced and made invisible even in the most difficult of spaces.

Intersectionality and the queer body

> Help me? Who’s gonna’ help me? Some gay place? I’m black and I’m gay and those faggots in [local urban community], “my people” you know what I mean, wouldn’t give me a dime. They just looked at me like I was trash. All they saw was “black.” They didn’t see a gay man needing help. Some didn’t even look at me! They wouldn’t even look me in the eye! (Cruz 2006, 133)

In this testimony a 19-year-old gay African American male tells the story of asking futilely for help and spare change in a gay urban community. In this narrative, the youth finds himself homeless and with little money was forced to beg passersby for spare change, thinking there would be help for him in a gay neighborhood. Yet it was easy for the primarily white residents of this upscale gay community to overlook and literally step around the youth as he asks for help. Hungry, despairing, and homeless, he finds that he is made invisible by the mostly white and gentrified gay residents and contemplates suicide. His story continues as the student is pulled away from a rooftop suicide attempt:

> The teachers, still standing at the small wall ran over and held [the student] down [so that he would not hurt himself] as the police made their way up the stairs. The youth struggled a little, but cried more. As soon as the police walked onto the roof [of the school], the student's body language stiffened – he stood up, held his head up, stopped crying, and kept a blank face – no emotion, no struggling, and no talking. A sobered and cautious gay man, hands cuffed behind him, walking slowly with police down the stairs. (Cruz 2006, 9)

At his breaking point, the police are summoned, and this young gay man of color is coded with the racialized narratives of the street poor specific to this city. Poverty, in this sense, diminishes any kind of transgressive subjectivity that this young gay man may have created for himself. In his struggle to help himself, the young man finds himself in the intersections of an LGBTQ community that has failed to construct a politic outside of the discursive climates of racial containment and restraint and has, in fact, adopted identities of collaborating with power. Maybe politics that stress, uncritically, "we are just like you," like those drivers in their cars fearful of queer youth, our mainstream gay and lesbian politics also roll up the windows of the mind shut, doors snapped closed and locked from the inside for queers of color, and at this moment, the possibilities of faithful witnessing between the LGBTQ community of this neighborhood and of this young gay man of color quickly disappear. The failure of the LGBTQ community to engage with racial difference and/or homeless youth figures largely here as no one offered help, or even empathy. Was this lack of engagement due to this young man's race or homelessness or part of how this city perceives young men of color?

Yet in these intersections of race, class, and sexual identities, the smallest resistances come from the body – gestures that are only suggested to the ethnographic eye. For this young gay black man, the presence of the police forces a new set of embodiments – whatever his original intent, the young man is not going to be beaten or shot involuntarily by police officers. Even in his moment of crisis, he summons and asserts his dignity in the face of the all too familiar police intervention. The youth's stoicism now serves to engage how police interpret and react to him – it is a survival strategy – drawing upon his knowledge about how authority responds to young black men in this city, knowledge that is just as important as his own difficult analysis of the relations between the mainstream LGBTQ community and people of color in this urban space. The body resists and it is here where we must contend that these actions may reflect, in various ways, larger political struggles between the homeless, young black men, and the role of police in the gentrification of urban space, between the mainstream LGBTQ neighborhood and its failure to engage with youth and the communities of people of color. In this story, the personal, as in the bodily experiences of homeless street youth, cannot be separate from the political and resistance is measured in the smallest of actions. In educational research, reclamation of youth agency begins in these spaces, where the intersections of race, class, homophobia, and urban space meet. It may be that resistance here is but one battle waged repeatedly by queer youth of color and that over time, as these daily struggles accumulate, we may see how these conflicts reconstitute the larger discourses of sexuality, restraint, and contamination.

Conclusion

There is an underclass of LGBTQ street youth in the US, made invisible by larger social forces and institutions like the police, the medical establishment, and schools and part of their struggle is against the larger discourses that define them as infected or contaminated, criminalized as youth of color, or made invisible as homeless, sometimes simultaneously. It is in this intersecting matrix of oppression where LGBTQ street youth emerge from a previously unseen or unacknowledged space to resist, sometimes in the smallest of ways, a young gay African American man summoning his dignity in front of police, a group of youth talking back to rude drivers in the middle of traffic, a friend talking back to an uncaring medical establishment. Recognizing resistance in tight spaces is about learning the literacy of the street and recouping agency from youth who struggle against the inscriptions of invisibility, expendability, and infection.

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Notes

1. Maria Lugones (2003) talks often of resistance in tight spaces – a spatiality of "one's relations, of one's productions and their meaning in both concrete and an abstract sense. You are concrete. Your spatiality, constructed as an intersection following the designs of power, isn't." This essay attempts to operationalize Lugones' concepts around resistance. To recognize resistance in "tight spaces" is about seeing "how oneself and others violate this spatiality or inhabit it with great resistance, without willful collaboration" (10). From Lugones' *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*.
2. See McCoy (1993).
3. Gregory Lewis, "Homeless Youth Shelter Stirs Debate in Castro," *San Francisco Examiner*, February 26, 1999.
4. Medical researcher James A. Fletcher evokes St. Paul's condemnation of men who have sex with men in an editorial of the *Southern Medical Journal*, February 1984.
5. See Mroz (2010).
6. "Clarissa" is a pseudonym. All subjects in this study were assigned codes and pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and complete anonymity. No names, places, or any identifiable information were collected during this study.
7. See Baron (1999).
8. Kaposi's Sarcoma is an opportunistic infection often associated with the HIV virus.
9. "Deservedness" is the discourse that argues that some folks deserve help, while others, through their own recklessness or through their lack of initiative or ambition, or because they are a criminal, deserve little or no help from state programs such as welfare, health care, or social services.

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