Davis's work fits in with this Gramscian model of philosophy insofar as her cultural production attempts to dismantle universals within both the dominant public sphere and various subcultures, both of which are predominantly white. The Gramscian notion of “a philosophy of praxis” helps transcend a more traditional Marxian binary between praxis and philosophy.21 Vaginal Davis’s performance attempts to unsettle the hegemonic order through performance of praxis (a performance that imagines itself as praxis). The performances that are produced are rooted within a deep critique of universalism and the dominant power bloc.

The cultural battle that Davis wages is fought with the darkest sense of humor and the sharpest sense of parody imaginable. Her performances represent multiple counterpublics and subjects who are liminal within those very counterpublics. She shrewdly employs performance as a modality of counterpublicity. Performance engenders, sponsors, and even makes worlds. The scene of speed metal and post-punk music is one which Davis ambivalently inhabits. Her blackness and queerness render her a freak among freaks. Rather than be alienated by her freakiness, she exploits its energies and its potential to enact cultural critique.

Antigay?

A close friend of mine and I have a joke that we return to every June. Upon the occasion of Gay Pride, a celebration of lesbian and gay visibility and empowerment held early in the summer in many major North American cities, we propose a gay shame day parade. This parade, unlike the sunny Gay Pride march, would be held in February. Participants would have certain restrictions to deal with if they were to properly engage the spirit of gay shame day. First of all, loud colors would be discouraged. Gays and lesbians would instead be asked to wear drab browns and grays. Shame marchers would also be asked to carry signs no bigger than a business card. Chanting would be prohibited. Parade walkers would be asked to maintain a single file. Finally, the parade would not be held in a central city street but in some back street, preferably by the river. We’ve gotten a lot of laughs when we narrate this scenario. Like many gags it is rooted in some serious concerns. While we cannot help but take part in some aspects of pride day, we recoil at its commercialism and hack representations of gay identity. When most of the easily available and visible gay world is a predominantly white and male commercialized zone (the mall of contemporary gay culture), we find little reason to be “proud.”

Some of these sentiments have recently been taken up in an anthology edited by Mark Simpson titled Anti-Gay.22 With its minimalist black courier print on a plain safety-yellow cover, the book makes a very low-key visual statement that would be appropriate for our aforementioned
gay shame day. Simpson’s introduction focuses on the failure of “queers’
grandiose ambitions.” He claims that

by focusing on the shortcomings of gay and refusing to be distracted by
how terrible heterosexuality is supposed to be, Anti-Gay may even offer the
beginnings of a new dialectic, a new conversation with the world, one that is
rather more interesting than the current ones.23

I am in accord with some of Simpson’s remarks. The gay communities we
live in are often incapable of enacting any autocritique that would engage
the politics of gender, racial diversity, and class. But rather than being criti-
cal about the politics of the mainstream gay community, Simpson merely
seems to be bored by a conversation that he feels has ceased to be “inter-
esting.”

At one point in his discussion, Simpson mentions the homogeneity of
the book’s contributors: “It [Anti-Gay] doesn’t promise to be more inclu-
sive than gay (contributions by only two women, only one bisexual and
none from people of colour.)”24 Simpson’s attack on “gay” is not con-
cerned with “gay’s” exclusivity, its white normativity, or its unwillingness
to form coalitions with other counterpublics, including feminist (both
lesbian and straight) and other minoritized groups. My own playful cri-
tique of the gay community, manifested in the gay-shame-day joke,
emanates from a deep frustration on my part toward what I call main-
stream or corporate homosexuality. By contrast, to be “antigay” in Simp-
son’s sense of the word is to offer criticism in a “been-there-done-that”
style whose main purpose is to register tedium.

The forms of “antigay” thinking put forth in Vaginal Davis’s work are
vastly different in origin and effect than Simpson’s Anti-Gay. Davis’s
brand of antigay critique offers something more than a listless complaint.
This additional something is a sustained critique of white gay male nor-
mativity and its concomitant corporate ethos.

“Closet Case,” another track on PME’s album, is, upon first glance, a
critique of closeted homosexuality. Further analysis also reveals that the
song critiques an aesthetic, rather than a type of individual. The song’s
lyrics depict a mode of living that is recognizable (especially from Davis’s
perspective as a working-class gay man of color) as a bourgeois Southern
California brand of urban gay male style.

“Closet Case”

She drives a Trans Am
And she lives in the Valley
Everynight she cruises
Gasoline alley

“The White to Be Angry”
Davis’s brand of antigay critique offers something more than a listless complaint.

This additional something is a sustained critique of white gay male normativity and its concomitant corporate ethos.

Salon tan
Ray Ban
All buff
Acts tuff
Big Dick, heavy balls
Nice pecs, that ain’t all

Y’know she’s a closet case

Got blow dried hair, wears a lot of cologne
Call her own condo on her cellular phone

She’s 38 but thinks she’s 2!
Covers those wrinkles in collagen
Old enough to be Richard Harris
Facial Scrub; plaster of Paris

You know she’s a closet case (Salon Tan!)
You know she’s a closet case (Ray Ban!)

The closet here is not necessarily the one inhabited by those who engage in homosexual acts but deny a gay identification. Instead, the queen depicted in this song is more recognizably in the closet about his age, appearance, and quotidian habits. Davis satirizes the closet queen whose style is easily recognizable on a map of urban Southern Californian homo-sexualities. A quick review of the particular type of queen being delineated is useful here. Brand names like Ray Ban and Trans Am, as well as cellular phones and condoms and the price tags associated with these commodities are integral to this queen’s identity. Equally important is the leisure-time salon tan, facial scrubs, and collagen injections. Most important of all is the “buff” gym-built body. Davis’s song offers the anatomy (physical, behavioral, and socioeconomic) of the normative and corporate homosexual. The closet case of the song is an elite within a larger spectrum of gay communities, and Davis’s satirical parody atomizes this cultural type. Humor is used to mock and degrade this mode of apolitical gayness, disrupting its primacy as a universal mold or pattern. Antigayness here is used as a way of lampooning and ultimately disrupting a modality of white gay male hegemony.

This same renunciation of elite gay male style is narrated in “No Thank You Please,” in which Davis recants the snow queen’s desire for elite white gay males. The song’s narrator manifests her displeasure for these gay elites by employing the raunchiest of vernaculars:

José Esteban Muñoz
“No Thank You Please”

So you want to lick my pussy?
Well you can’t cuz you’re a sissy
Can’t get into my bed
I won’t give you head
Say, no thank you please
I don’t eat head cheese

I can’t get involved
Bang your head against the wall
Take me to the king of hearts
There they have bigger parts
Chandelier hanging
Sexy gangbanging
Say no thank you please
I don’t eat head cheese

You better take me to the rack
I’m looking for my bladder snack
He feels on my crotch
It’s not worth the notch
Say no thank you please
I don’t eat head cheese

LA water polo team
All the men are hot and lean
Get into your tub
A rub-a-dud-dud
A splishing a splashing
A urine reaction
I can’t get involved
Bang your head against the wall.

The one-minute-and-five-second song’s tempo is relentlessly fast. Davis/Clarence snarls the lyrics. Her deep and husky voice booms in the tradition of classic punk rock rants. There is a powerful juxtaposition between lyrics that indicate she will not let the sissy addressee “lick her pussy” and the actual butch vocal style. The lyrics themselves map out the snow queen’s desire, “LA water polo team/All the men are hot and lean,” and then resist that desire, “I can’t get involved.” The last line of the song, “Bang your head against the wall,” does the work of performing both butch masculinity and, at the same time, the general frustration that characterizes the snow queen’s desire—the desire for white men who almost exclusively desire other white men.

“The White to Be Angry”
The above reading and its emphasis on Davis’s snow queen disidentification is not meant to dismiss the song’s antigayness. Indeed, the snow queen herself, or at least a snow queen with some degree of reflexivity, understands the “antigay” position from the vantage point of a gay man who has been locked out of the elite white gay male sphere of influence.

According to Stuart Hall, who has adapted Gramsci’s theorizations for race analysis, the notion of the war of positions (as opposed to an outdated orthodox Marxist war of maneuver) “recognizes the ‘plurality’ of selves or identities of which the so-called ‘subject’ of thought and ideas is composed.” Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe a war of maneuver as “a situation in which subordinate groups seek to preserve and extend a definite territory, to ward off violent assault, and to develop an internal society as an alternative to the repressive social system.” In contrast, a war of positions is predicated on the understanding that diverse sites of institutional and cultural antagonism must be engaged to enact transformative politics. While the war of maneuver was a necessary modality of resistance at a moment when minoritarian groups were directly subjugated within hegemony, the more multilayered and tactical war of positions represents better possibilities of resistance today, when discriminatory ideologies are less naked and more intricate.

Gramsci offers an expanded understanding of both the individual subject and the collective subject. He does not permit any pat definitions of group identity or the role of any individual within such a collective matrix to hold. Within Gramsci’s writing on the ideological field, we come to glimpse that subordinated ideologies are often rife with contradictory impulses, that “subordinated ideologies are necessarily and inevitably contradictory.” Thus Gramsci lets us understand not only working-class racism, but also gay racism or homophobia within communities of color.

Cornel West has also turned to Gramsci’s work in emphasizing the need to forge a microstructural analysis of African American oppression where traditional Marxian hermeneutics can only offer us macrostructural analysis. Readings that posit subordinate groups as unified entities fail to enact a multivalent and intersectional understanding of the various contingencies and divergencies within a class or group. Thus Gramsci offers us an extremely appropriate optic through which to evaluate the disidentificatory work that Davis performs within subordinated classes like “gays” and liminal groups like the hard-core/punk rock community. Hall explains that Gramsci shows how the so-called “self” which underpins these ideological formations is not a unified but a contradictory subject and a social construction. He thus helps us understand one of the most common, least explained features of “racism”: the “subjection” of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideologies which imprison and define them. He shows
how different, often contradictory elements can be woven into and integrated within different ideological discourse; but also, the nature and value of ideological struggle which seeks to transform popular ideas and the “common sense” of the masses.29

“Queerness” and “blackness” need to be read as ideological discourses that contain contradictory impulses within them—some of them liberatory, others reactionary. These discourses also require hermeneutics that appraise the intersectional and differential crosscutting currents with individual ideological scripts. Davis’s work is positioned at a point of intersection between various discourses (where they are woven together); and from this point she is able to enact a parodic and comedic demystification, and the potential for subversion is planted.

Disidentification, as a mode of analysis, registers subjects as constructed and contradictory. Davis’s body, her performances, and all her myriad texts labor to create critical uneasiness and, furthermore, to create desire within uneasiness. This desire unsettles the strictures of class, race, and gender prescribed by what Guattari calls the “social body.” A disidentificatory hermeneutic permits a reading and narration of the way in which Davis clears out a space, deterritorializing it and then reoccupying it with queer and black bodies. The lens of disidentification allows us to discern seams and contradictions and ultimately to understand the need for a war of positions.

Notes

This essay benefited from the thoughtful feedback of my colleagues Phillip Brian Harper, George Yúdice, and Bruce Robbins. I am also grateful to audiences at Columbia University’s “Passing” Conference, the University of California—Riverside’s “Unnatural Acts Conference,” and the Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California—Berkeley, for their comments and invitations to present this work. I am most grateful to Vaginal Davis, my muse for this project and others, who generously lent me her time, wisdom, and archives. Her work and her example kept me laughing and thinking as I prepared this paper. Dr. Davis can be contacted at editor@L.A.Weekly.com or 1-213-389-5188.

4. Ibid.

“The White to Be Angry”


8. “Realness” is mimetic of a certain high-feminine style in standard realist terms.


12. Here I do not mean *homogeneity* in its more contemporary usage, the opposite of *heterogeneous*, but, instead, in a Gramscian sense that is meant to connote social cohesion.


14. Miss Guy’s image was featured in designer Calvin Klein’s CK One ad campaign. Her androgynous, nontraditional drag was seen all over the nation in print and television advertisements. This ad campaign represented a version of gender diversity that was not previously available in print advertising. Yet, once again, the campaign only led to a voyeuristic absorption with gender diversity and no real engagement with this node of difference.

15. Queercore writer Dennis Cooper, in an attempt to out the “real” Davis in *Spin* magazine, implied Hilliard was the artist’s true identity. The joke was on Cooper, since Davis’s professional identity as Hilliard was another “imagined identity.” Davis has explained to me that her actual birth name is Clarence, which will be an important fact as my reading unfolds.

16. An alternate yet complementary reading of the name Clarence that I am offering here would link this white militiaman and the act of cross-race minstrelsy to the Bush-appointed Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, an African American who has contributed to the erosion of civil rights within the nation.

17. Here I risk collapsing all antigovernment militias with more traditional domestic terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan or neo-Nazis. Not all militiamen are white supremacists, and the vast majority of white supremacists are not in a militia. But Davis’s Clarence is definitely concerned with racist militias whose antigovernment philosophies are also overtly xenophobic and white supremacist.


20. Ibid., 348.


23. Ibid., xix.
24. Ibid.
27. Hall, "Gramsci’s Relevance,” 439.
Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender. By positing queer as a point of departure, for a broad critique that is calibrated to account for the social antagonisms of nationality, race, gender, and class, as well as sexuality, this special issue, edited by Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, José Esteban Muñoz, and Trish Rosen, constitutes an intervention in what is still the early formative stage of queer-theoretical engagement. Contributors to this issue include Phillip Brian Harper, David L. Eng, Rosalind C. Morris, José Esteban Muñoz, Judith Halberstam, Don Kulick, Rachel Holmes, Priscilla Wald, David Valentine, and Riki Anne Wilchins. C. Jacob Hale, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Tim Lawrence, Judith Butler, and Nancy Fraser. $19.00 Fall/Winter 1997