Embodying transnational queer Black and Brown utopia in alternative QTPOC nightlife spaces

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Abstract

This focus explores queer Black and Brown feminist and utopian politics as imagined in modern-day alternative nightlife spaces. This is done through case studies of the QTPOC (Queer and Trans People of Colour) nightlife spaces of Queertopia by the Other Village People in Johannesburg, Misery Party and Pxssy Palace in London, and Papi Juice and BK Boihood in New York. These cities are particularly lifted up as spaces of Black and Brown resistance to white dominance and racial capital, even within LGBTQIA+ spaces that implicitly or explicitly do not cater to Black and Brown queers. Through these examinations, it is argued that queer feminists of colour are embodying queer utopia through parties that centre healing, mental health, ancestral faith practices, queer Black and Brown music and dance traditions, and spaces for activists and cultural workers to gather beyond mainstream bars and nightlife. By linking these practices to transnational resistance to racial capitalism and cisheterophobia, and by particularly catering to queer people of colour involved in social movement, resistance, and cultural organising work, these parties exist as experiments in Black and Brown transnational feminist practice. This article examines the bonds that organisers and attendees of these parties build with each other across borders, both in physical nightlife spaces as well as in digital spaces conducted during COVID-19 lockdowns that explicitly brought queer people of colour together to dance and dream transnationally. It ultimately argues that these nightlife spaces are practices of imagining the possibility of utopias where queer people of colour thrive beyond borders.

Keywords: queer utopia, queer nightlife, queer and trans people of colour, cultural organising

Introduction

Can queer of colour nightlife open space for queer feminisms, transnational politics, activisms, and utopias? How does the dance floor and the DJ booth emerge as a space of imagined and embodied radical transnational linkages between queer Black and Brown people across global cities in South Africa, the United States of America (USA), and the United Kingdom (UK)? Could we see the queer party – especially the queer party for working-class Black and Brown nonbinary and trans queers, for queers outside the homonormative – as a space that uniquely builds transnational queer feminist futurisms?

In this focus piece I interrogate these questions, sparked by my participation in queer Black and Brown nightlife and activism/organising spaces in the cosmopolitan cities of Johannesburg, London, and New York. As an activist and a scholar of queer of colour participation in leftist social movements, these cities are where I have made my home over the past decade. I have gravitated to these cities due to my interest in social movements and

Black and Brown resistance: while they are urban spaces that dominate as spaces of racial capitalism, global finance, and stratified segregation, they are also places of deep Black and Brown resistance through activism, cultural organising, and the everyday of survival in the belly of the colonial beast. Through their shared history in the colonial and the radical, they serve as deep sites of transnational connection and imagination over the years, places where, as capital seeks to create one transnational and homogenised form of a city, queers and working-class people and Black and Brown residents have strived to create another that holds room for all and transcends the national into the utopic and transnational. As a queer Brown femme myself, the queer of colour spaces I explore are not only sites of research, but sites where I have sought out community and home as a transnational subject living between global cities and nations.

Particularly during and post-COVID-19, I noticed an expansion in nightlife spaces geared towards Black and Brown queer people that specifically explored the possibility of queer utopias and queer worlds beyond borders and the nation-states. Echoing Muñoz's (1999, 2019) analysis of queer of colour drag performances that disidentify from the national and create an alternate space of identity and belonging for Black and Brown queers in the USA, these queer spaces imagined queer transnational feminisms and activisms towards a queer world beyond the nation. Particularly as lockdown encouraged those with access into a digital that seemed unbounded by borders, while revealing a conversely transnational shared experience of dispossession by those on the periphery deemed essential workers who could not shelter in place, I saw more and more activists and artists question what better worlds might look like. Or, in the words of the Queertopia festival run by Other Village People, a queer Black collective based in Johannesburg, "Imagine what the world would feel like if it were designed by and for queer communities?" (Queertopia, quoted in Collison 2021). These queer Black and Brown nightlife and dance spaces offer joy as feminist politics as an answer to that imagining.

DJ DBN Gogo entrances Queertopia revellers in 2021. (All photos taken by the author.)

A DJ plays for the crowd on the third night of Queertopia in November 2021.

The altar within the exhibit on queer nightlife and activism at Con Hill during Queertopia in November 2021, called 'The House of Remembrance'. Photos included archival documentation of GLOW members, Kewpie and District 6 residents, and others, as well as contemporaneous footage from recent nightlife and protest events.

To explore how these queer of colour nightlife spaces grow Black and Brown queer politics and feminisms, I first begin with a theoretical framing of nightlife spaces and queer clubs and parties as political and activist gatherings, and an examination of how transnationalism emerges in these forms. Next, I explore select examples of queer of colour nightlife spaces in Johannesburg, New York, and London that actively explore the transnational and the queer feminist and political. The first set of these spaces are actively transnational in their feminist practice, drawing links across borders and travelling as parties and activist convenings themselves. The second set of these spaces are rooted within their geographical proximities, but extend their explorations of community and politics beyond the spatial paradigms of their cities and nations. In assessing my own experiences in these spaces, as well as the ways that these spaces characterise their politics and their queer Black and Brown feminisms, I draw conclusions for the possibilities of queer Black and Brown feminisms that centre joy, pleasure, and utopic politics as a method towards systems change.

Theoretical framings of transnational queer of colour feminisms within queer nightlife

The dance floor, club, and nightlife spaces are often thought of as spaces outside of the political, purely oriented around pleasure, desire, and, in many cases, sex. Alternately, they can be spaces that replicate and hyperbolise the politics of the outside world in terms of access to capital, desirability politics, and power. Being or seeing queer Brown femmes rejected from straight clubs while hetcis white friends are offered entry provides a succinct

commentary on the politics that the straight and implicitly white club creates. Much exploration has been done on the ruptures that Black and Brown femininity and dance can wield within these club spaces, or within specifically Black and Brown nightlife zones (Pawel 2021; Durham et al. 2013; Johnson 2021; Khubchandani 2016; Adeyemi et al. 2021; Allen 2022; Adeyemi 2022). Beyond these transgressions in otherwise cisheteronormative spaces, this article focuses on Black and Brown feminist politics located specifically within the queer club – and particularly the queer of colour party and club – for the ways that these racialised, gendered, and queered spaces challenge and, in Muñoz's (1999) words, provide space for queers of colour to disidentify with the normative, and instead create alternate ways of being and doing politics through queer of colour life-worlds.

Like the straight party and club, clubs and nightlife spaces particularly geared towards LGBTQIA+ community members also centralise pleasure and desirability. However, these acts can be read as political in their rejection of the heteronormative. Buckland (2002, p. 43) in their exploration of the utopian and political aspects of queer dance, describes the queer club as spaces that "offered a separate reality for many participants", spaces that could give rise both to "escape from the outside world" (p. 86) as well as "prepolitical configurations of community" (p. 86). Through shared dance, gesture, and physical proximity, the queer dance floor becomes a space of liberation from cisheteronormative expectations and norms, and can give rise to alternate mechanisms of sociality as well as the possibility of embodying what an alternative world could look like. It's no coincidence that Stonewall, a queer club, gave rise to the riots and resistance led by Black and Brown trans women, queer and trans sex workers, lesbians, and white queer men, and yielded today's pride parades.

The stories of Black and Brown leadership in Stonewall, like that of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, were often silenced in later, white-led and sanitised retellings that decentred radical Black and Brown trans and queer activism (Mayora 2018; Jackson 2021). Salkind (2018) similarly locates how the queer Black roots of disco, house, and techno have been obscured in favour of a whitewashed retelling of electronic music dance scenes. But QTPOC presence in the queer club has also yielded upheaval of normative queer politics. From Stonewall to Chicago house clubs, the queer club has often been a site where radical coalitions, that Cohen (1997) describes as between "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" emerge. The relationships formed on the dance floor – particularly between queer and trans people of colour – and the gestural enactions of queer utopia in queer space, provided sites for strengthening the belief in queer utopia outside of the dance floor. This formed no small part of the activisms and social movements outside of nightlife space that strove to enact that.

Spaces that prioritise the experiences and participation of racialised queers are often particularly politicised, as the queer club – implicitly the white queer club – can perpetuate many of the elements of white supremacy and institutional racism that exist in the outside world. Adeyemi et al. (2021, p. 3) locate queer nightlife spaces as at times places of "utopia" and "refuge and play", but also acknowledge their possibility as "sites of alienation that are circumscribed by normative modes of exclusion," particularly in ways that are racialised, classist, and cisheteronormative. Thus, the queer of colour club is an alternate even from another alternate space; it is a space that attempts to centre Black and Brown desirability as an embodiment of the future we want to see in the world, rejecting the racialised violence perpetuated within the implicitly white and cis mainstream gay club.

Muñoz's seminal works on disidentification and the search for queer of colour utopia detail his own teenage embrace of punk as a subculture that affirmed anti-normativity but often excluded people of colour. His later pathway to queer of colour performance and drag as

spaces characterises these as spaces that allowed queers of colour to disidentify with the normative and to create life-worlds that, in the 1990s and 2000s in the USA, were unique for being unabashedly queer and Black and Brown (Muñoz 1999, 2019). Quoting Marlon Riggs, Muñoz explores how finding queer of colour space outside of the "sea of vanilla" (Riggs, in Muñoz 1999, p. 9) in the Castro, San Francisco's "gaybourhood", provided both Riggs and Muñoz a space to explore a politics of queerness that needed not to be aligned either with whiteness or heteronormativity. Instead, queer of colour club, dance, and performance spaces live out the "desire for a queer life-world that is smoky, mysterious, and ultimately contestory" (Muñoz 1999, p. 34) in its rejection of white dominance within and outside of queer spaces. By affirming the need for spaces that unapologetically centre Black and Brown queer lives, the queer of colour dance floor becomes a space for queer utopia that "is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world" (Muñoz 2019, np). Adeyemi et al. (2021, p. 13) also find the possibility that the queer femme of colour bar can wield a "co-constitutive nature of 'sex and social justice'" and a "sanctuary" for queer Black and Brown femmes imagining alternate worlds, although Adeyemi (2022, p. 5) notes that that even these queer of colour nightlife spaces cannot form a complete "utopian outlet from neoliberal rule" and can themselves reify the hierarchies of the outside world. But in affirming a space to be, and at times connecting beings politicised by their engagements with the violence of cisheteronormative and racialised society, the queer of colour club is a space of deep politics.

This practice of the political in club, dance, and nightlife space holds deep precedent in queer activism during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the USA and globally. Stonewall's riots in New York emerged from relationships formed between trans and queer people of colour in club space; similarly, Bost (2015) details how queer Black clubs in Washington, DC served as key spaces for queer Black activism against HIV/AIDS as well as key spaces of respite and replenishment. Salkind (2018) likewise traces the defiant activism within Chicago's underground queer Black and Brown scenes for house electronic music scene in the 1970s, arguing that these spaces emphasised congregation and the liberatory potential of nightlife and house music. Adeyemi (2022) locates the modern-day iterations of these spaces of Black resistance in Chicago nightlife in queer Latinx clubs, like the Pulse club in Orlando, Florida, that suffered a deadly attack in 2016. Lawrence (2016, p. 8) describes how attendees and revellers found "a home, a refuge, a community centre and a pleasure palace" away from the whiteness that pervades even queer spaces.

In these ways, the Black and Brown queer dance floor creates a home that, in its assertion of the beauty and desirability of Black and Brown bodies, is inherently political. Khubchandani (2016, 2020a, 2020b) goes further in exploring the explicit politics of the queer dance floor: in his exploration of queer South Asian dance party nights in the USA and in India, he locates the performance of "unruly femininities" on the dance floor that "facilitate[e] alternative forms of sociality" (2016, p. 71). More explicitly, Khubchanani (2020b, p. 4) writes:

> Queer dance at nightclubs and parties then is not merely an escape from politics, but a chance to revel inside them, letting power, meaning, bodies, aesthetics, and affects collide and find each other in new ways, inventing alternative realms to inhabit.

Similarly, in South Africa, Livermon (2014) locates the space-making and political and joyful mediations that queer Black presence articulates in parties in Soweto. By disrupting gender norms, by subverting apartheid-era racial politics of space and place through centring queerness not in the white city but in the Black township, queer Black and Brown dance and nightlife is inherently radical. Brown (2021) also locates the growth of queer parties

specifically for queer Black and Brown South Africans, providing an escape from the expectation of the pink rand in excess in rich white gay spaces.

Adeyemi (2022, p. 4) finds an unnamed queer Black woman's disruption of a white gay space and her avowed return to Black neighbourhoods in Chicago to be a questioning not only of where Blackness is presumed to belong, but a rupture of the "racialized spatialized parameters around who is presumed to feel good in the neoliberal city". Thus, by refusing the whitewashing of queer, and through centring joy for dark bodies often excluded from its possibilities, queer Black and Brown nightlife and dance spaces embody and enact utopian politics in a way that often transcends boundaries and borders of the here and now towards wider communities that are imagined and yet deeply possible.

While Khubchandani, Livermon and, to a lesser extent, Muñoz focus particularly on the gestural expressions of queer men, drag queens, and performance artists on the dance floor, this article focuses on the politicised expression of largely queer Black and Brown women and femmes through nightlife and dance spaces. I locate these spaces as explicitly and unapologetically feminist and transnational in their politics for the way that they centre Black and Brown femininity away from the gender binary, and their appeals to ideas of a global Black and Brown feminism that finds its expression on the dance floor.

This theorising of the resistance inherent within queer Black and Brown nightlife spaces builds deeply on the work of scholars like Allen (2022), who locates Black feminist thought and life-making woven together between the dance floor, the written and spoken word, and liberatory struggle on the streets, and importantly traces this work in similar transnational and urban ways, woven in shared spirit between global cities like Nairobi, London, Paris, and Port of Spain. Adeyemi (2022) also lifts up the rebellion of queer Black feminist space-making in gentrifying neighbourhoods in Chicago. Adeyemi's book *Feels Right* foregrounds an analysis of how Black femme bodies mark sites of physical rejections of displacement and whitewashing, and instead defiantly claim space through embracing and questioning the politics of what "feels right" in ways that are indelibly marked by race and class, similar to the claiming of space by Black and Brown queers that I explore below.

In thinking through this space-claiming as local and also transnational praxis, Mohanty (2003) writes that Black and Brown feminisms, and particularly queer feminist activisms, are instead sites of transnational "crossings" (p. 976) – operating across borders, nation-states, and cultural and geographic specificities to find globalised sites of struggle. Matebeni (2011) also gestures to these transnational Black feminisms in her exploration of Black lesbian sociality and activisms in South Africa: for these women and femmes, the club and the dance floor are key sites of meetings, crossings between communities, imaginings of better worlds, and building the trust and stamina required for activism and organising outside of the spaces. Building from Mohanty and other Black and Brown feminist scholar-activists, Browne et al. locate transnational Black and Brown feminisms as a space that "work between the local and the transnational" due to "transnational flows of migrants, labour, diaspora communities, commodities and cultural products" (2017, p. 1378). In essence, these transnational feminisms arise in specific locations, but grow across borders in their resistance to globalised racial and gendered capitalism and develop "through collective practice and particular kinds of theorizing" (Alexander & Mohanty 1997, p. xx).

In applying these sites of global-local feminisms, or transnational Black and Brown feminisms, to the dance floor in the following sections, I articulate how queer utopic sensibilities are embodied and strengthened through performances of joy and hope, and how

the queer Black and Brown dance floor can provide an on-ramp to feminist activism as well as a site in itself that imagines a Black and Brown transnational feminist world.

Imagined transnational feminism in queer of colour nightlife spaces

In November of 2021 I attended a three-day festival at Constitutional Hill in Johannesburg, the site of the former apartheid-era prison that, since South African liberation, has been purposed as an event space in the centre of the city. This gathering was called 'Queertopia' and was led by the Other Village People, a collective of queer Black nonbinary people, butch people, and femmes who run convenings for queer people. These events take place both within nightlife and party spaces, like their monthly 'Same Sex Saturday' parties, as well as within daytime spaces that decentre alcohol and drinking, like shared meals and hikes. I was drawn to Queertopia for its tagline: on Instagram and on the website selling tickets, the event read, "Queertopia is a reimagining of a country, a new world order that normalizes and celebrates our differences as if it's always been that way … where the LGBTQIA + community is prioritised and all allies are welcomed" (Other Village People, 2021). After spending the previous few months in Johannesburg drawing connections between its Black and Brown queer scene and the similar spaces I had attended in New York, London, Mexico City, and Bombay, I was curious to see how this reimagining of a country – a drawing of transnational politics on the dance floor – would be lived out at the event. The notion of reimagining a queer utopia beyond borders felt particularly pressing in a South African climate wracked by xenophobic violence, racial tensions, economic downturn, and hyper-segregation between rich/white and poor/Black and Brown. While South Africa often heralds itself as an already-existing queer utopia amidst the assumed homophobia of the rest of the continent, this utopia is often only accessible to rich white gays while poor Black and Brown queers contend with the spectre of apartheid alongside continued queerphobic violence. A space that reimagined a country or a world, rejected the tightening of borders and boundaries, and centred Black and Brown queers on the site of a former apartheid-era prison, felt like a compelling utopia indeed.

On the first night, an opening 'ceremony' took place with sage burned alongside dance and live music. The ceremony concluded with the raising of a new multi-coloured flag in accordance with the day's theme, "A New World Order" (Queertopia 2021). The flag symbolised, as the organisers announced, the possibility of queers living beyond the confines of the nation-state and within a new queer world. As the flag was hoisted, Black and Brown queers – largely femmes across the gender spectrum as well as butch women and nonbinary people – danced to a mixture of amapiano, American hip hop and R&B, and 1970s house and disco from across the world, reclaiming a site of former pain through embodied transnational politics and sonics. These multicultural sounds gestured to the legacy of queer Black and Brown music in resistance transnationally, from hip-hop's roots in Black defiance, from the rebellious underground Chicago house and hip-hop scenes that Salkind (2018) and Adeyemi (2022) respectively trace, to the revelry and dissidence of disco in HIV/AIDS activism that Bost (2015), Pawel (2021), and Allen (2022) reveal, to amapiano's current role in South African music, both as sounds that celebrate masculinity as well as sounds that reaffirm and centre queer joy, as argued by DJ-scholars like Denise (2019). These sonics affirmed an effort to cast out the queer- and transphobia and racism of their daily lives, instead celebrating with transnational Black-centric odes to the possibility of lives beyond borders and fear. As attendees switched between amapiano moves and vogueing, these embodied practices of dance too gestured to a Black transnational politic. While voguing and other

Black American practices can be linked to, as Allen (2022, p. xvi) argues, "the realm of global mass culture" in ways that are at times sanitised or misconstrued, in Queertopia's space these practices retained a revolutionary spirit, visible in the wrist snaps, 'beaten' faces, beautiful outfits, and transnational utopic visions on political posters read and held by the festival's revellers.

The second night of Queertopia heightened the theme: called the 'House of Spirit', it hosted queer Black sangomas and other healers who doubled as musicians, artists, meditation guides, and discussion facilitators. Queer Black and Brown Jo'burgers gathered to discuss their hopes for queer life in South Africa, and the parents of one of the organisers talked about shifting the hearts and minds of their community in support of their queer child. Organisers and participants explicitly invoked a transnational queer Black and Brown feminist politic, speaking of the possibility of reshaping not only South Africa but the world to hold and love Black queers, and the importance of building power across communities and nations in the Global South to embody and enact queer utopia.

Many of the attendees spoke about their experiences with queer and feminist activism, with groups like Total Shutdown and the Fallist movements, and recounted both their disillusionment with activist spaces as well as their belief that another world is possible. The night showed a clear lineage with the Black lesbian feminist disruptive practices of One in Nine, who shut down the Johannesburg Pride march in 2012 in protest at the march's whitewashed nature, its presence in the extremely white neighbourhood of Sandton, and its centring of pinkwashed corporate rhetoric about representation without attention to the continued violence against poor Black and Brown trans and queer people across South Africa (Scott 2017; Matebeni 2018; Müller 2019). These concerns resonated with the commentaries about heightened racism and queerphobia in the outside world, particularly in the wake of the racialised July riots and unrest across the country, and continued killings of Black and Brown youth in townships and urban spaces, beyond the refuge that Queertopia imagined. In fact, organisers from One in Nine held space in Queertopia's conversations alongside younger Millennial and Gen-Z activists and partiers who had been too young to remember the events.

Similarly, a side room at Queertopia held a gallery exhibit commemorating queer Black and Brown nightlife and resistance past, with photos of voguers dancing and getting ready together from recent balls, images of Kewpie and District 6 queer life, snippets from GLOW meetings with members like Simon Nkoli and Beverly Ditsie, photos from Zanele Muholi and others' works lifting up queer Black agency, and documentations of direct actions by queer Black feminist groups against instances of "corrective rape" (Müller 2019) and murders of queer Black and Brown South Africans. The exhibit was complete with flowers and candles at the base of photos of queer elders past, creating a space that was reminiscent of a shrine or altar to South African queer resistance and defiant joy. Queertopia's discourse and embodiment created a space for intergenerational queer Black learnings and visions, echoed in the songs of Muneyi, a queer Black musician who invoked their grandmother's support for their sexual identity and who sang lyrics imagining stories of queer Black youth falling in love many generations ago.

The night culminated in a performance by Buhlebendalo, a queer Black femme musician who spoke about their choice to work with all queer Black femme musicians in their backing band, and who sang original compositions against gender-based violence as well as a reimagining of Brenda Fassie's songs, bringing the legacy of queer Black South African feminism into the modern day. In one moment, the Black and Brown queers around me turned to each other, all radiant with glitter and sweat from dancing, and I mused with a

friend as we raised our hands that "this feels like church – or what church should feel like". Reimagining the space of collective worship on the dance floor felt like an embodiment of Muñoz's words on queer of colour utopia through performance, of "reformulating the world *through* [sic] the performance of politics" (Muñoz 1999, p. xiv). By performing politics through dance and song in collective faith, we showed our faith not in an external God or spirit but in ourselves, in the possibility of queer Black feminist action across national lines. In another moment, when the performers sang in Zulu, I asked a Black lesbian activist friend near me what the words meant; as she taught me about their literal meaning and their political implications while we danced together, I felt the same sense of political development through dance and across race and community that Khubchandani (2016, p. 79) writes about in his experiences in India, where teaching about dances and songs created "moment[s] of pedagogy and shared embodied practice with the rest of the club".

Broadening this shared embodied practice, Bagnol et al. (2010, p. 293) write of select queer spaces in Johannesburg that, unlike the many that conform to race and class lines, instead provide cross-racial spaces where "on the dance floor [in Braamfontein] everyone dances with everyone." This marks a significant departure from the majority of queer spaces in South Africa, as in other post-colonial and Global North nations, where white, class-privileged, cis, gay male revellers often dominate in ways that perpetuate the spatial politics of apartheid segregation, as Matebeni (2018) has explored in both Cape Town and Johannesburg. But in Queertopia's space at Con Hill, not far from Braam, the mixing that Bagnol et al. describe was true – Black, Indian, Coloured, white, South African and foreign alike raised hands and sang and danced in hopeful unison to unapologetically queer Black feminist lyrics, offering a space that truly embodied a 'new world order' and a queer world across race and nation.

Brown (2021, p. 67) finds that these queer Black and Brown nightlife spaces have proliferated in South Africa, particularly in response to the dominance of white – and rich – spaces and bodies in the mainstream gay scene. Queer of colour nightlife in South Africa, like Queertopia:

> … present a critique of access to class mobility, space, and promised resources and rights, asserting their own rights to fabulous, queer, pleasurable practices of comportment, consumption, and a coming together along the lines of identity inclusion.

By asserting the right of Black and Brown queers in South Africa to reimagine the nation and the world, Queertopia leveraged this critique in a heightened sense. Queertopia, thus, as in other queer of colour nightlife spaces, marked a space that is inherently deeply political. As Khubchandani (2020b, p. 4) writes:

> queer dance at nightclubs and parties then is not merely an escape from politics, but a chance to revel inside them, letting power, meaning, bodies, aesthetics, and affects collide and find each other in new ways, inventing alternative realms to inhabit.

By centring the experience of Black queer South African femmes, by holding space to think about not only the pain of queer Black people but the agency and spirituality and power they hold, the politics exhibited at Queertopia divested from traditional white feminism focused on the Global North. Instead, it lifted up a South to South queer feminism that embodies transnationalism through gesture: this queer Black nightlife reveals an undergirding

“anticapitalist transnational feminist practice” (Mohanty 2003, p. 59) that highlights “the possibilities, indeed the necessities, of cross-national feminist solidarity” in the way that Mohanty (2003, p. 59) describes, through imagining a world for queers – an embodied queer Black world-making in the way Allen (2022) traces in Black disco and activism – a world beyond the cisheteropatriarchal nation today.

I experienced this imagined queer Black and queer of colour utopia and transnational Black feminisms in other sites that echoed and resonated with what I saw at Queertopia. Marching in a radical pride march in the UK in 2022, a queer person of colour wore a leather jacket with writing on the back that proclaimed that queer utopia was here today through the practice of activism and community gathering. Joining a call on queer utopias conducted between London, Oslo, Vienna, and Bangladesh, a group of activists and writers considered the possibility of queer South Asian utopias through activism and praxis. In nightlife spaces, at a party for queer people of colour led by groups named Pxssypalace and Crossbreed in London in 2022, a banner read “we believe in queer utopias”. Commenting on the importance of this messaging, the nightlife collectives wrote, “We know how far off we are from living in a Queer Utopia, our message is one of hope, change and of solidarity with one another” (Ahmed 2022). In these words, Pxssypalace and Crossbreed echo Muñoz and Khubchandani: while queer utopias are not here today, the act of imagining solidarity across communities opens up space for hope that we can move towards utopian politics through embodying these dreams in spaces of joy.

At their recurring parties, Pxssypalace also actively decentres white queer and feminist politics, instead creating a space for the “magic we have as QTBIPOC that the rest of the world often tries to capture, replicate or erase” (Pxssypalace 2022). By creating this space away from the rest of the world, Pxssypalace creates connections with queers of colour across the Global South, not only through playing music from queer artists of colour located across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but through lifting up a politics of possibility for queers of colour to thrive, enacted on the dance floor. As one queer Indo-East African participant told me about a recent Pxssypalace event, “It feels like you’re not even in London anymore,” speaking about the ability to transcend queer English whiteness in order to find a space that embodied queer Black and Brown feminisms and also reminded her of home if home had been radically queer. More explicitly, at one of Pxssypalace’s most recent events in London, a butch Black MC rapping on the mic introduced herself by describing how she loved Pxssypalace’s parties so much, she created one when she moved to New Zealand, hoping to create explicit links between Black and Brown feminisms across borders and the globe. The music at Pxssypalace, like Queertopia, centres a transnational Black rebellious spirit, moving from Afro-Caribbean dancehall and soca, to house and techno and disco that asserts its Black roots in the way Salkind (2018) and Allen (2022) trace, to modern-day Black British grime and drum & bass and at times even South African amapiano. Though Pxssypalace and Queertopia’s events were located within the queer life-worlds of their respective cities, Johannesburg and London, their focus on imagining a world – and embodying it through music and dance – shows the possibilities of a queer Black and Brown feminist politic that grows from the dance floor into a transnational utopian politic.

Enacted transnational Black and Brown queer feminisms through nightlife

Beyond the imagined transnational Black and Brown feminisms in parties like Queertopia and Pxssypalace, other queer of colour nightlife spaces explicitly operate across borders and

nations to fuel spaces of shared transnational queer feminist politics in multiple geographical zones. One key example of this is a party based out of New York called Papi Juice. On its website, Papi Juice calls itself an "art collective that celebrates the lives of queer & trans people of color [sic]" and articulates its identity as "at the intersections of art, music, and nightlife" (Papi Juice 2022, np). Papi Juice unabashedly centres Black and Brown femmes across the gender spectrum, with illustrations of fem gay men, high-femmes, dykes and studs, and nonbinary people adorning event posters in a clear break from the hypermasculine ethos of traditional gay dance parties. While this is an implicitly feminist act, the party organisers and DJs go further to embody queer Black and Brown queer feminisms. Papi Juice's focus on nightlife is explicitly political: in a *Vice* interview between the three queer people of colour at the helm of the collective, they argued that:

> nightlife is a place that queer folks have congregated for over a century now. Our collective's work is more intentional than just a party. Our mission is to affirm and celebrate the lives of queer and trans people of color [sic] who exist all 24 hours of the day. (Hosking 2019, np)

They commented on the centrality of queer of colour nightlife spaces to organising, from the Stonewall riots and protests to the "everyday routines, celebrations, or acts of resistance LGBTQ people engage in" (Hosking 2019, np). These words deeply recall Adeyemi's (2022, p. xii) analysis of similar Black lesbian nightlife spaces in Chicago, where this author argues that:

A Papi Juice party on a Brooklyn rooftop in July 2019.

> Black queer women of course get on the queer dance floor to have fun and to feel good. It is also an intensely political space where they enact rigorous, detailed theories about the relationships between movement and feeling in a city that is entirely draining and on dance floors that are seemingly always threatened by many kinds of violence.

Such theories show up in the same ways that Papi Juice's dancers assert their right to a gentrifying/gentrified New York space that seems hell-bent on decimating the legacy of queer Black and Brown resistance. By asserting celebration, resistance, and the everyday together, both Papi Juice and Adeyemi imagine Black queer feminist worlds that are transnationally linked in their imagination of utopias on the dance floor, in the mundane, and out on the streets across cities and nations.

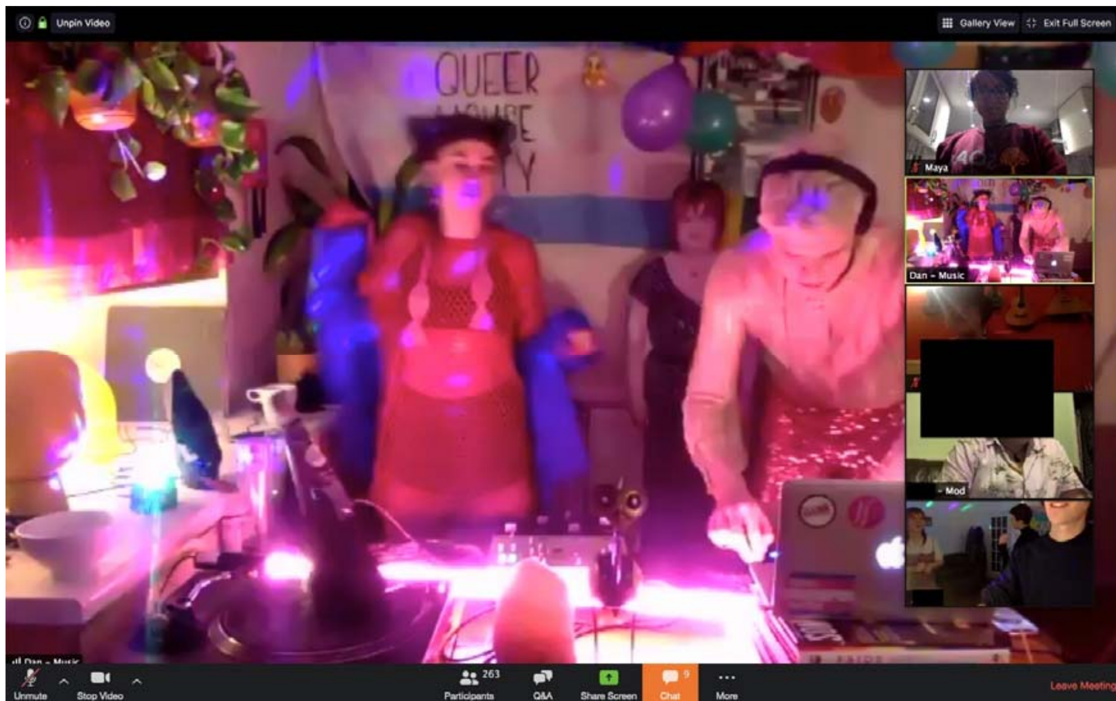
In 2019 Papi Juice's annual party on the weekend of New York Pride, commemorating the Stonewall riots, was titled 'World Pride'. During that event and others, signs and banners were placed around the event and DJs spoke about recent murders of Black trans and nonbinary people, not only in New York and the wider USA but also across the African diaspora and the continent. DJs and organisers at Papi Juice regularly speak about hopes for the liberation of queer people of colour and centre the legacy of QTPOC leaders like Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Miss Major in Stonewall and other New York and transnational queer history. They frequently share about recent events and spaces for organising locally and transnationally, and at times invite local queer Black and Brown organising groups like the Audre Lorde Project to speak at events about their campaigns to protect trans and queer Black and Brown people and imagine a world without police.

All this invokes Lorde's (1984) analysis of the erotic and queer pleasure as power and shows the deep interweavings between spaces of pleasure and spaces of activism, as adrienne marie brown (2019) and other queer Black organisers and cultural workers also explore in the Black feminist essays that make up *Pleasure Activism*. Queer Black and Brown activists and cultural workers are regularly in attendance at Papi Juice parties, and the space embodies the sense of a belief in a queer Black and Brown utopia where people can live joyfully, in resistance to the pervasive and spreading white nationalist and Christofascist movements in the outside country, even in a purportedly cosmopolitan and liberal city like New York post the election of Trump to the US presidency (and before and after).

Beyond these imagined transnational feminisms, Papi Juice also physically collaborates with queer of colour feminist groups outside of the USA, in party spaces as well as in activist spaces. The organisers hosted a 'Papi Juice London' party in 2021 that hosted British queer Black DJs and queer feminist activists, and worked in collaboration with local queer Black and Brown groups like Pxssypalace and Misery. Groups like Hungama, a queer South Asian party collective, similarly travelled to host parties in collaboration with local queer of colour groups in NYC and the Bay Area. But these embodied transnational Black and Brown feminisms through nightlife that particularly expanded during the pandemic. While lockdowns confined queer people's geographic ranges to the home spaces that some had access to, the online space also expanded geographic reach transnationally for those who could access digital spaces. During COVID-19 lockdowns, Papi Juice and groups like queer SWANA party collective Yalla joined digitally transnational queer of colour parties that catered to queer Black and Brown attendees who joined from across Europe and North and sub-Saharan Africa as well as North America.

Some of these digital parties were organised by Queer House Party, a London-based collective of queer DJs, many of whom organise closely with a group called Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants. LGSMigrants is a queer anti-deportation collective based in the UK that carries out direct actions to resist the violence of the UK border system, in collaboration with African migrant groups and queer groups in the UK as well as across West Africa, like the African Rainbow Collective (LGSMigrants 2020). LGSMigrants emphasise the idea that "queer solidarity smashes borders" (2020, np), an ethos that translates to the

Queer House Party digital gatherings. Within these weekly party spaces participants spoke about the impacts of COVID-19 particularly on queer, femme, and racialised bodies and organised mutual aid and direct actions, alongside dancing to queer Black and Brown DJs from a variety of countries calling in from diverse locations. These digital spaces for transnational connection naturally brought their own constraints, particularly highlighting which participants had access to bandwidth, time, or space private enough to engage in queer parties during the lockdown. Many participants spoke about the trauma of being essential workers, or watching family members who were being forced to move back in with homophobic family members, or being in unstable housing or homeless due to pandemic-related income and housing loss. While the digital spaces could not create a transnational utopia out of nothing, they did create a space for some queer Black and Brown youth to both bring their struggles and leave them aside during dance breaks in their bedrooms and living rooms, and to connect to others living and feeling in similar ways.



A Zoom-based dance party convened by Queer House Party (London) during COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK in 2020.

Papi Juice, Yalla, and other queer Black and Brown DJs and organisers from New York and other spaces in the USA also joined a set of digital parties led by Misery, a queer Black and Brown mental health collective based in London that leads sober parties, foraging walks, counselling and art sessions, and other activities designed to support QTBPOC community and health. In one online Misery Meets during lockdown, the facilitators led participants through somatic practices to ground the body and address trauma and stress induced by the housing instability, unsafe home and family conditions, and potential homelessness that many queer people of colour were facing. In discussing these practices, facilitators characterised these as feminist and liberatory acts particularly for queer and femme bodies, linking their methodology to Lorde's (1981) poetry on the somatics of the Black lesbian body, and participants quoted passages from adrienne marie brown's (2017) queer Black feminist text on pleasure activism. After these exercises, facilitators discussed organising methodologies,

and then invited DJs from Yalla and Papi Juice alongside London-based DJs to conduct a queer of colour dance party.

The energy in the Zoom room transcended the confines of the screen: for a moment; calling from my partner's living room, it felt like we were embodying queer Black and Brown feminist utopia together. Though I keenly felt my privilege to be in a space where I could call in safely and easily, surrounded virtually by other queers of colour, I imagined that we had found, if only for a brief time, the "utopian sensibility" that Buckland (2002, p. 93) writes about in queer clubs' dance floors and we were "inventing alternative realms to inhabit", as Khubchandani (2020b, p. 4) writes about being on the dance floor. In these moments, from each of our rooms, it felt that in the midst of crisis, we had briefly stepped beyond the isolation and disconnection of the pandemic – and instead, through our hip whines, twerkings, gyrations, and bellydances, we were embodying a movement that believed that Black and Brown queer femmes could and would thrive.

Conclusion

In queer Black and Brown nightlife spaces like Queertopia, Papi Juice, Pxssypalace, and Misery, queer Black and Brown feminisms find their space not only in direct action, door-to-door campaigns and traditional social movement politics, but also in embodied collective movement. These nightlife spaces queer the notion of what makes up Black and Brown feminisms and activisms, following the work of queer Black and Brown scholar-activists like Lorde and Muñoz, through an insistence on joy, pleasure, and the erotic at the centre of politics. By opening space for queer femmes of colour to dance together, they centre the physical practice of embodying imaginings of worlds beyond their geographic and political locations. Through this physicality, removed from the violence of both the white gay bar and the white and heteronormative outside world, these parties invite in a utopian and prefigurative politics: they practice what a world without borders, racial capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy could look like. These parties envision this connection across cities, nations, and borders, through multicultural and defiant Black and Brown sonics and dance, and an appeal to Black and Brown feminist politics that pull from across Black and Brown diasporas and homelands in a firm affirmation of the right to space, the right to thrive, and a world beyond white nationalism, cisheterophobia, and racial capitalism.

By embodying these hopes on the dance floor and connecting them to struggles and everyday acts of living, these parties firmly hold space for the transnational alongside the local of QTPOC feminist utopian activism. These parties take place in cities that dominate the cosmopolitan imaginary as well as white extraction into global finance and capital. They assert Black and Brown joy in the belly of the beast, they link resistances that happen in spaces of tension, and they push up against the omnipresence of the imperial and segregated spatialities by vehemently emphasising Black and Brown queer people's right to the city in cities carved out by whiteness. This transnationality in Johannesburg, London, and New York is linked thus not merely by racial capitalism, but by the resistance it encounters, and the crossings of Black and Brown queer feminism that this resistance weaves. Through practices like hoisting a new flag, inviting the somatic into the digital, building Zoom room dance floors, and travelling to DJ and dance with queers of colour in varied cities where diverse cultures meet, these nightlife spaces embody transnational queer Black and Brown feminisms by believing and enacting that feminist utopias can exist.

The dance floor, thus, is a site of the possible – a site of healing, of politics, of faith, and of joy, for queer Black and Brown femmes expending infinite labour to usher that world into belonging in the wider world. These sites of possible, then, provide not only a respite from this activist labour, but also a place to continue to imagine what we organise for – across race, place, borders, and nations – towards a world where queer femmes of colour are truly free.

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