

Unsaid & Out Loud: Queer of Color Critique in the Lafayette Classroom

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What are the formative images that come to mind when conjuring the concept of “queer of color”? It’s likely ballroom culture. Trans pioneers of the gay liberation movement. The spectacle of a Lil Nas X music video. The hushed voices of relatives and the questions and comments that go unsaid. It’s elation, celebration, and jubilation. It’s suffering in silence and suffocating in secrecy. It is all so ephemeral and indescribable. How does one summarize an experience so varied but so powerful that no two queer people of color could ever tell the same story?

Queer people of color have a history that is vast and varied and knows no capstone. So many stories have been told while others have been silenced by the hand of what Audre Lorde has coined “the mythical norm.”¹ Despite this rich background of people who exist on the beautiful spectrum of sexuality, gender, and race, history is too often written by the victors, the colonists, and the oppressors.

One space primed to combat the whitewashing of history—including queer history—is the college classroom. Outside of paying respect to the queer people of color that have moved the effort for equity forwards, teaching queer of color critique to everyone means creating a larger baseline of knowledge. When more people are aware of the inequities of the past, they are less likely to repeat them. Much of conservative rhetoric today revolves around queer and POC identities being unprecedented when they in fact have a long and robust history. An education in queer of color history gives us a language to identify and describe the world around us.

Lafayette College is a predominantly white institution, with roughly 65% white student enrollment in AY 2020-2021, according to [Forbes](#). Knowing how mired in whiteness the college can be, we wanted to find out more about how the college integrated queer of color critique as an academic discipline following its rise around the turn of the 21st century. In investigating this curricular history, we looked into course catalogs and department syllabi, discussed past course

¹ Lorde, Audre. “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” *Sister Outsider*. Crossing Press, 1984.

offerings with department heads, spoke with faculty who teach queer of color critique in their courses, and conducted interviews with current students who have worked with this material in a Lafayette course. This project aims to record and distribute Lafayette's own intersectional history that has gone too long without being told. Not only do we need to teach queer of color critique, but we need to document the history of its teaching for future generations. This way we break the cycle of silence.

Background

Historically, Lafayette College has been labeled the most homophobic college campus in the United States. Given this title in 1992 by *The Princeton Review*, the college has both administrative and personal evidence backing this statement. In [an interview](#) with the Queer Archives Project, for example, Peter Theodore (class of '97) reflects on the campus atmosphere of the mid-90s, noting how "there was still no really visible gay community on any of the levels, from administration, to faculty, to students."

Granted, we do not live in 1992 anymore, and the College currently has a 4.5-star rating on the [Campus Pride Index](#). Yet the problems of the past manifest into problems of the present. As recently as 2017, the student organization Quest made a call for greater curricular focus in queer studies, penning [an open letter](#) to the Lafayette community in which they wrote, "[A] twentieth-century education must include new methods for understanding the complex spectrum of sexualities and genders while providing opportunities to unlearn socially enforced binaries. Support through an academic lens provides objective information, positively impacts the climate for LGBTQ students, and fortifies the College's affirmation of the multiplicity of human experience."

Today we can see how Lafayette is a microcosm of the issues that queer people currently face. From internet harassment on Yik Yak to lack of funding for queer organizations, to outright blatant bigotry by both students and faculty, the new brand of homophobic behavior is shrouded in anonymity. It is hard to point fingers at a single source of the problem when you do not know someone's intentions. It is no longer in vogue to say transparently racist and homophobic things in public, but it is easy to hide behind screens, be it bureaucratic or digital.

While homophobia and racism still very much exist on this campus, it would be negligent to say that no effort has been made to improve both the day-to-day lives and visibility of queer and/or POC students on campus. Today we can see the efforts of Out, OID, Nia, ABC, Lavender Lane, QTPOC, and other campus organizations geared towards the safety and comfort of

marginalized groups at the college. The various queer and POC-friendly organizations are not simply about holding events; they are trying to advance opportunities for these marginalized communities, hopefully finding solace and solidarity in each other. It is a chance to build and strengthen the bonds within and in-between identities as well as find commonality and shared experiences. Lafayette College does facilitate the existence and funding of these groups, but at the end of the day, participation and education are optional. A student could easily spend their entire education here never knowing anything outside of the history written and taught by white cis straight men. So much nuance and information is buried or hidden through omission in the school's curriculum, making it a matter of great importance to bring queer of color critique into the Lafayette classroom.

The field of queer of color critique gained widespread attention as an academic discipline at the turn of the 21st century. While writers and thinkers such as the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa did the work of queer of color critique decades before it found its way into college classrooms, it gained traction as an academic discipline with the publication of texts like José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) and Roderick A. Ferguson *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2003). Following the publication of these landmark texts, the corpus of queer of color critique quickly expanded, and courses focusing specifically on its framework appeared in colleges and universities across the country.

The college classroom has the potential to be, as bell hooks formulates in *Teaching to Transgress*, "the most radical space of possibility in the academy."² Transgressive pedagogies can grant students and faculty the opportunity to work together to challenge the normative frameworks of race, class, gender, etc. on which the academy was founded. Queer of color theory and literature can help achieve this work, as its demand for intersectional analysis and focus on materiality expands ways of seeing the world, providing students with models that challenge normative ways of reading, writing, and thinking.

In recent years, scholars have highlighted the importance of queer of color pedagogies, specifically in reading and writing. Eric Darnell Pritchard, for example, writes about the negative impact of normative literacies, which "creat[e] and [maintain] a dominant culture that renders the Black queer an invisible subject in literacy, composition, and rhetorical studies" (12).³ In the introduction to a special issue of *Curriculum Inquiry* focused on Queers of Color and

² hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. Taylor & Francis, 2014.

³ Pritchard, Eric Darnell. *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2017.

Anti-Oppressive Knowledge Production, Ed Brockenbrough echoes this sentiment, noting how “stakeholders and allies might draw upon queer of color epistemologies to interrupt the systems of domination that, in the absence of intentional and collective resistance, are reproduced through hegemonic modes of knowledge production” (427).⁴ These are just a few of the reasons Lafayette students should have the opportunity to engage with queer of color critique during their time at the college.

Teaching Queer of Color Critique

A search in the course catalogs from the past 25 years reveals that there have been very few courses at the college that center queer of color critique. Instead, traces of the field can be found in course descriptions, revealed more fully only in checking the course syllabus.

In the English department, for example, several courses feature queer writers of color, although the extent to which their work is engaged on a theoretical level is unclear. Professor Ian Smith has offered ENG 274: Taboos: Literary Sexualities in several semesters, and its course description speaks to an intersectional approach to literature, opening with: “Few contemporary issues generate as much controversy as same-gender attraction and relationships; fewer still are so deeply rooted in oppression, violence and discrimination. Literature, a vital tool of social investigation, plays a key role in exploding sexual taboos and the related politics of silence.”

Similarly, during his tenure at the college Professor Bryan Washington offered several sections of ENG 304: American Writers focused on James Baldwin. Without access to course materials, it’s difficult to tell if/how the course engaged with queer of color critique, but the course’s focus at least speaks to the centering of queer Black writers in some department offerings.

The field seems to be most pointedly engaged in a course from the Spring 2020 semester, when Professor Randi Gill-Sadler offered a section of ENG 352: Topics in Black Literature subtitled “Black Feminist Literature and Theory,” which included readings from prominent queer of color thinkers such as Barbara Smith, Roderick Ferguson, and Toni Cade Bambara. It was this same course code—ENG 352—that Professor Bruno taught in the Spring 2023 semester with the title [“Queer Movements: Queer of Color Literature and History, 1950s–Present.”](#)

⁴ Brockenbrough, Ed. “Introduction to the Special Issue: Queers of Color and Anti-Oppressive Knowledge Production.” *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43.4, Theme Issue: Queers of Color and Anti-Oppressive Knowledge Production, September 2013, pp. 426-440.

One faculty member who incorporates queer of color critique in their current courses is English Professor Ryan Mitchell. Trained in the fields of rhetoric, composition, and pedagogy, Prof. Mitchell incorporates aspects of the discipline in all of his courses, since, as he puts it, “queer of color critique forces one to reckon with the invisible logics of oppression, [so] it's a really useful center and mooring point for larger thematic conversations.” An example of this practice is engaging Karma Chávez in his Contemporary Rhetorical Theory course (ENG 350) to discuss coalition building across different identity groups and the relationship between border policy and queer rights. In other courses, he includes works from Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others.

In speaking about the benefit of introducing this work in the college classroom, Prof. Mitchell said, “One of the things that I think the queer of color critique does, which is so powerful both for queer students of color, queer students who are white, and then also cis/het students generally, is weave together in really profound ways the various intersectional forces of power that operate to not only construct hierarchies of value, perpetuate systems of domination, but also point to pathways for liberation.”

Such liberatory pathways are necessary not only on a smaller scale in the classroom, but in countering what Prof. Mitchell identified as “the legacy of homophobia” on Lafayette’s campus, which he notes is still strong. Reflecting on the campus climate of inclusivity, he had this to say: “I think that it's a vibrantly homophobic and anti-queer campus. I think that when queerness is allowed, it's only in the form of homonormativity – so thinking about people who very squarely align with the dictates of heterosexual relationship patterns: being married, having children, engaging in kind of respectability politics across the board. So it downplays what I think is the actual true intellectual and political value of queerness, such as active resistance and alterity to the dominant structures which define the identity of the institution.”

Professor Mary Armstrong, a professor of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies and chair of the department, was hired in 2009 specifically to chair the WGSS program and build a major. As a WGSS theorist, she teaches queer feminist theory broadly as well as courses in gender and sexuality studies at the upper levels.

Reflecting on how queer studies has appeared in Lafayette courses since her arrival, she said: “[What] I have seen since 2009, a decade and a half, is that queer content in the curriculum has emerged sporadically across different places. [...] It now lives under many umbrellas, but it rarely stands by itself.”

Outside of the courses recently taught this year by Professor Bruno and Professor Fernandes, there appear to have been a very small handful of courses that outwardly mention their discussion of queer studies, let alone queer of color critique. While there have been certain courses that do mention a focus on queer studies in course descriptions—typically in Anthropology and Sociology, Film and Media Studies, and English department classes—it does not come across as a main theme. Prof. Armstrong believes we'll see more of this content over time, noting, "It seems to me that it's almost like a percolation effect, that very slowly LGBTQ and queer issues are percolating up into the curriculum, across the curriculum, but there are very few moments where it's the focus."

Another question that revolves around this choice to include courses specific to these topics would be the interest of the student body. Given the conservatism of Lafayette in its past and present day standing, it raises the concern of how well courses that are being advertised under queer-focused descriptions will do during course registration. To this, Armstrong described her first year teaching a 300-level sexuality studies course and how many staff members did not think it would be successful. Yet, nine students signed up, and over time, the class gained a reputation of excellence. With a name built around it, the course was able to pull in a second group of students that wanted to take the course based on what they had heard from peers. This newfound interest from various students calls for more classes and more qualified instructors.

Yet, it also raises the idea of the inclusion of these topics into the curriculums across Lafayette. How could we integrate them? Armstrong responded with a "dream" situation, saying: "I think we should have a larger cluster of faculty, not in just one department, but in many. Let's say we'll have six or seven new faculty. There [would be] a good bit in English, somebody in history, WGSS and in Africana Studies...different places all of whom look at queer life, queer issues, queer of color issues. [...] It would also be coordinated to something like a Queer Studies minor and LGBTQ Studies minor that you could have under WGSS. [...] I think the investment in a large number of faculty does this, but also the visibility and coordination across departments. [...] Hiring faculty to teach them and then coordinating those faculty to some degree would be the answer to really get the curriculum moving forward, as opposed to an occasional course by occasional people who have 20 other jobs."

While he doesn't teach queer of color theory himself, English professor and medievalist Walter Wadiak offered insight into what it's like to be a queer faculty member at the college. After falling in love while completing his one year graduate program in Singapore, Prof. Wadiak and his partner found that their time together would soon come to an end if they didn't do something to stay together. Realizing this was a matter of "fish or cut bait," Prof. Wadiak

followed his partner back to the US and took a job at Lafayette College, where he's taught in the English department since 2016.

Wadiak spent roughly eight years from 2008 to 2016 working in Singapore. What separates Asian homophobia from American homophobia is that in many Asian countries, queerness is shrouded in shame and taboo as opposed to the outright "gay bashing" in the west. He recalled that while nobody in Asia would outright condemn his queerness, he was also forced to keep his identity hidden. He was surprised to come back to the US in 2016 and find that the country and campus culture had shifted. "I have a little whiplash at the pace of change," he said. "I went away for about a decade, and then when I came back, everything just felt completely different."

Despite Lafayette's history of homophobia, Wadiak cites feeling lucky about the presence of other openly queer students and faculty. He makes the active effort to come out early in the semester to his students to establish the classroom as a safe space for queer students. Although medieval literature can be rather unkind to its gay and queer-coded characters, Wadiak wants his classroom to be a place of academic challenge and emotional safety. He recalls a "turning point" two years into his teaching career when a "waspy, traditional" student came out as trans on the last day of class. "They just wanted to reveal [who they were] to me," he recalls. "And they got up the courage to do it on the last day."

But he also acknowledged how being a queer professor himself doesn't necessarily mean that he's going to succeed in doing justice to all of his queer students. The process of becoming an ally to both queer and POC students has a learning curve, and sometimes that means making mistakes. He recalls one particular student from his earlier years of teaching. He recalled, "I'm thinking of [one moment] in particular, [where] I feel like I failed. [...] There was a queer POC student in my class [who] was sort of just disengaged and was not doing the work. And I was kind of, you know, this was years ago now. But I think I was too much of a disciplinarian, and I should have tried to have more of a conversation based on our common experience. And I didn't do that. I don't know why now. I would now. But back then, I kind of feel like I did the wrong thing."

A Student Perspective

In our interview with Professor Mitchell, when asked about how queer students of color might feel encountering queer of color critique in their classes, he knew he couldn't necessarily answer from a personal standpoint, but offered the following comment: "My assumption would be—and again, this is an assumption—that it is empowering insofar as the fact that it provides a

framework for resistance, a language for liberation, and a path toward the realization of new brighter futures.”

We spoke to queer students of color to learn about their experience engaging with queer of color critique in Lafayette courses. Shirley Liu '23 enrolled in multiple courses in the English department that featured queer of color critique, including ENG 365: Seminar in Literary Criticism with Professor Fernandes. Reflecting on their experience in the class, Liu said, “This class felt really refreshing because it was the first time I ever took an English class where works by queer and/or POC scholars were included in a way that didn't seem to tokenize them or gloss over their scholarship. Rather, these works were as embedded into the class as works by cis het or white authors. This honestly motivated me to put more effort into the class because the readings and material actually felt relevant to me as a queer person of color.”

Liu also took a section of ENG 206: Literary History—a required course for English majors—with Professor Randi Gill-Sadler, who focused her section of the course on the Black Arts Movement. According to Liu, the course “interrogated the idea of a singular literary history by focusing on Black writers from this very specific time period” and included readings from queer Black writers including Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and June Jordan. “This is probably one of my favorite English classes I've ever taken,” Liu reflected. “I'm so glad I decided to fulfill the requirement with this class. I learned so, so much, and I truly appreciated a Literary History class that focused on Black writers and not what people would typically consider the canon.”

Image Patterson '25 is a Film & Media Studies major who has encountered queer of color critique in courses at Lafayette. When asked about their experience working with these materials in the Lafayette classroom—including in ENG 135: Introduction to Queer Literature with Professor Bruno—they said: “I am going to be honest, it depends on who brings it up and in which class. If it's a queer-coated assignment, then sure.” When asked about their experience of queerness on Lafayette's campus and how inclusive they found the campus on the whole, Image pointed to their living arrangement in [special interest housing for queer students](#), responding, “Living in Lavender Lane has been so affirming to me. Everyone's queerness is unique and I can be me without any animosity.”

Another student who wished to remain anonymous took WGS 101: Intro to Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and said of his experience encountering works from queer writers of color, “I enjoy it personally. I think that it is important that their voices are heard and they enrich my perspective.”

But he was much more critical of the larger campus culture when it comes to inclusivity. "Lafayette is not a safe space to be a queer person of color," he told us. "I mean you have kids in fraternities who say they are not ready for a queer person of color. Also, a lot of people in their fraternities are queer but don't feel comfortable expressing their sexuality around their 'brothers.' I think that says a lot about queerness within Greek life. But athletics are also pretty hostile towards queer people, as someone who is a member of one of Lafayette's athletic teams I can attest to the homophobia ingrained within Lafayette's sports culture. Each time is extremely heteronormative and though may show or wear a pride flag has members say blatantly homophobic things. Moreover, Football and Lacrosse history with LGBTQ people on this campus has made being queer a physical worry as nobody wants to be [a victim of a] hate-crime and we fear these individuals may attack us like they have previously."

In response to a follow-up question about how their current impression of queerness on the Lafayette campus differs from their first impression, anonymous also shared, "Well, Lafayette is becoming more inclusive, but honestly it's still not a safe space to be out, queer, and a person of color. I think part of it is that Lafayette recruits a lot of people to fund this school from wealthier backgrounds who have never been exposed to queer people of color." This comment speaks to the importance of incorporating queer of color critique throughout course offerings. This would help those who feel alone or isolated feel seen and supported, as well as help dismantle racial prejudice and homophobia.

We asked the interviewees about how the social structure on campus allowed for queer color of inclusivity in all academic spaces. Image replied, "No—the POC queer community is so small and while it's nice, we aren't welcomed into many spaces. White queerness is accepted and is the standard."

Our anonymous source had a similar response. "In the classroom I think professors have done a pretty good job of promoting queer inclusivity through respecting pronouns, using queer authors and openly stating that students who attack queer voices is not acceptable," he told us. "But the social campus at Lafayette is ingrained with homophobia and racism. They really need to reevaluate how they can make campus more inclusive, but from an economic perspective it doesn't make sense. The college is incentivised to keep it as white as possible. That's the fundamental measure for a 'good' and 'bad' school similar to 'good' and 'bad' neighborhoods."

Both interviewees offer very important perspectives on the social structure of queerness that is present, or not, on Lafayette's campus in and outside of the classroom. The lack of diversity within the college plays a huge role in the problems that marginalized students face. Without

proper knowledge about minoritarian cultures or the explicit drive to create a better social and learning environment, the problems will continue to worsen.

Because Lafayette College is a predominantly white institution, we know that white students will necessarily be in any course that features queer of color critique, and that the content can also shape their views in important ways. Maria Cangro ('24) took ENG 365: Seminar in Literary Criticism, and said of the course, "It was my favorite course I've ever taken. It was also the first time I read queer of color theory in an academic setting, and I think that was definitely pivotal for my academic development. Reading these materials impacted my thinking on an interpersonal level, but also impacted my learning. I had come into college knowing that queer of color literature and theory was worthy of investigation in an academic space, and taking ENG 365 was the first time I had that thinking validated (and expanded). That class was also a reminder to every student that the experiences and writings of QPOC are just as worthy of being taught and analyzed in the classroom as those of cishetero white men."

Maddy Amadio is currently finishing her sophomore year at Lafayette. As a WGSS minor, she has taken classes—such as WGS 280: Feminist Theory—that incorporate queer studies. When asked about the role of queer of color critique within the classroom, she commented on how professors create a respectful environment in class and acknowledge their own positionality. "These professors are also respectful when discussing topics that have to do with queerness/race by acknowledging how they don't have the same experiences and perspectives as the group being addressed," she said. "There is an effort being made to make classrooms more comfortable for everyone."

As a double major in Psychology and A&S, Lauren Daniels ('25) has taken various courses that included information about queer and sexuality studies, such as Psych of Gender, WGS 101, and Poverty in America. When asked about her perspective of the inclusivity of queerness on Lafayette's campus, she expressed positive feedback about the little she knew: "From my knowledge there seems to be some pretty great resources, spaces and opportunities on campus for queer folks. I am not often in these spaces so I do not know about their inclusivity, but I have never felt excluded from these spaces. They appear welcoming."

Maddy also responded with something similar when she was asked the same question, but also expresses concerns within certain social spheres, specifically Greek life: "The school does provide safe spaces for queer individuals through Lavender Lane and other campus outreach programs. The establishment of gender neutral bathrooms in academic buildings has been another important step for the campus to become more inclusive... I also see how queer

students are treated in Greek life at Lafayette. From my perception, being queer and in Greek life can be difficult. I feel as though sororities are significantly more open to queer individuals than fraternities.”

These responses reveal the discrepancy between queer and non-queer students in their understanding of homophobia on campus. The white, non-queer students see that the school is offering resources to those who identify as queer, but since they do not have any personal use for them, they have not experienced the complications and problems that arise in these spaces.

Conclusion

The professors and students we talked to all seem to agree that Lafayette College could be doing more for the benefit of queer people on campus, especially queer people of color. Courses that center queer of color history are hard to come by, which is not only a shame for queer students of color themselves, but for the Lafayette community as a whole.

As said by a collective of gay activists in the eighties, SILENCE = DEATH. The phrase originated to discuss the violence caused by the government’s inaction in addressing the AIDS epidemic, but it resonates still, due to the inherent violence that lies in silence. To never tell the stories of people of color, queer people, and especially those at the intersection of both of these groups, means to erase them. It means a second death where we never speak their names again. German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin argued that history is meant to preserve the existence of the names we cannot remember. It is meant to fill in the gaps between the Napoleons and the Caesars of time. It is to take that “tiger’s leap” into the past and salvage what we did not bother to celebrate; that is why teaching queer of color critique is important. It is an active effort to disrupt the colonized narrative of time that has been constructed and reinforced by the oppressor.

By disrupting this colonial narrative of time, we gain so much art, literature, and other media from which we can learn more about how systemic oppression towards queer people of color continues to this day. Lafayette College’s campus remains fundamentally homophobic and centered on whiteness, but the spreading of knowledge of this oppression can allow more people on campus—both students and faculty—to be more sensitive to this marginalized intersectional group as well as queer and POC students not at this intersection. Silence equals death, but giving a voice to this community equals justice.