Thanks to the miracles of Facebook, I can today account for about 75 percent of my talented costars. But no Esther, because I can’t for the life of me remember her name.

It was, by all accounts, a triumphant show. Thereafter, though, I was confused to have earned myself a reputation, and had become the target of a fair amount of teasing: Hey Elisa, are you a feminist? Hey Elisa, women belong in the kitchen! Hey Elisa, are you going to get married and have lots of babies like women should? Hey Elisa, are you a lesbian? A good many peers, and even adults, in my life seemed to find it cute to bait the grade school feminist. I found myself embroiled in verbal spats about my burgeoning identity, forced to defend ideas I didn’t yet understand. Despite the fact that I was utterly without the tools to properly argue my as-yet-unarticulated case, it was clear to me that something was off: This “feminism” thing got me into creepy one-sided arguments with grownups.

My elderly great uncle tersely advised me, ostensibly in response to my fifth-grade feminist harlotry, to “keep my legs crossed.” Another relative liked to mock me with statements like “Women shouldn’t be doctors,” just to laugh while I sputtered furiously in disagreement. It pissed me off long before I could fully understand what was going on.

Some years passed before Grace Paley and Naomi Wolf and Jean Kilbourne and Gloria Steinem and Ani DiFranco and Vivian Gornick and Susanna Kaysen and Andrea Dworkin kindled the spark of a complex adult feminism, but I’m convinced that my embrace of the above-mentioned hinged on already having identified—in that stubborn, childish, attention-hungry, dinner-party-delighting way—with Vashti. Her refusal to degrade herself for the entertainment of her shmucky husband and his shmucky friends, her dignity in the face of being dumped and cast aside, her sadly lacking place in the Old Testament, singular refuser of ancient gender paradigms.

The Megillah doesn’t give us much detail about what happened to Vashti, but it’s likely she was put to death at the king’s insistence. I’m not very observant these days, but every Purim—a holiday on which it’s a mitzvah to get so drunk you can’t tell the difference between Haman and Mordechai!—I toast her spirit, and my fellow players in that long-ago Shushan spectacular, for helping me begin to see what resistance is all about.

Dismantling Hierarchy, Queering Society
Andrea Smith (2010)

Queer politics calls us to go beyond a simple toleration for gay and lesbian communities to address how heteropatriarchy structures white supremacy, capitalism, and settler colonialism. By heteropatriarchy, I mean the way our society is fundamentally based on male dominance—a dominance inherently built on a gender binary system that presumes heterosexuality as a social norm.

To examine how heteropatriarchy is the building block of U.S. empire, we can turn to the writings of the Christian Right. For example, Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson makes a connection between homosexuality and the nation-state in his analysis of the war on terror, claiming that one of the causes of terrorism is same-sex marriage:

Marriage is the traditional building block of human society, intended both to unite couples and bring children into the world. There is a natural moral order for the family.... The family, led by a
married mother and father, is the best available structure for both child-rearing and cultural health. Marriage is not a private institution designed solely for the individual gratification of its participants. If we fail to enact a Federal Marriage Amendment, we can expect not just more family breakdown, but also more criminals behind bars and more chaos in our streets. It’s like handing moral weapons of mass destruction to those who would use America’s depravity to recruit more snipers, more highjackers, and more suicide bombers. When radical Islamists see American women abusing Muslim men, as they did in the Abu Ghraib prison, and when they see news coverage of same-sex couples being “married” in U.S. towns, we make our kind of freedom abhorrent—the kind they see as a blot on Allah’s creation. We must preserve traditional marriage in order to protect the United States from those who would use our depravity to destroy us.

The implicit assumption in this analysis is that the traditional heterosexual family is the building block of empire. Colson is linking the well-being of U.S. empire to the well-being of the heteropatriarchal family.

Heteropatriarchy is the logic that makes social hierarchy seem natural. Just as the patriarchs rule the family, the elites of the nation-state rule their citizens. For instance, prior to colonization many Native communities were not only nonpatriarchal, they were not socially hierarchical, generally speaking. Consequently, when colonists first came to this land they saw the necessity of instilling patriarchy in Native communities because they realized that indigenous peoples would not accept colonial domination if their own indigenous societies were not structured on the basis of social hierarchy.

Patriarchy in turn rests on a gender-binary system; hence it is not a coincidence that colonizers also targeted indigenous peoples who did not fit within this binary model. Many Native communities had multiple genders—some Native scholars are now even arguing that their communities may not have been gendered at all prior to colonization—although gender systems among Native communities varied.

Gender violence is a primary tool of colonialism and white supremacy. Colonizers did not just kill off indigenous peoples in this land—Native massacres were also accompanied by sexual mutilation and rape. The goal of colonialism is not just to kill colonized peoples—it’s also to destroy their sense of being people. It is through sexual violence that a colonizing group attempts to render a colonized people as inherently rapable, their lands inherently invadable, and their resources inherently extractable. A queer analytic highlights the fact that colonialism operates through patriarchy.

Another reality that a queer activist approach reveals is that even social justice groups often rely on a politics of normalization. Queer politics has expanded our understanding of identity politics by not presuming fixed categories of people, but rather looking at how these identity categories can normalize who is acceptable and who is unacceptable, even within social justice movements. It has also demonstrated that many peoples can become “queered” in our society—that is, regardless of sexual/gender identity, they can become marked as inherently perverse and hence unworthy of social concern (such as sex workers, prisoners, “terrorists,” etc.). We often organize around those peoples who seem most “normal” or acceptable to the mainstream. Or we engage in an identity politics that is based on a vision of racial, cultural, or political purity that sidelines all those who deviate from the revolutionary “norm.”

Because we have not challenged our society’s sexist hierarchy (which, as I have explained, fundamentally privileges maleness and presupposes heterosexuality), we have deeply internalized the notion that social hierarchy is natural and inevitable, thus undermining our ability to create movements for social change that do not replicate the structures of domination that we seek to eradicate. Whether it is the neocolonial middle managers of the nonprofit industrial complex or the revolutionary vanguard elite, the assumption is that patriarchs of any gender are required to manage and police the revolutionary family. Any liberation struggle that does not challenge heteronormativity cannot substantially challenge colonialism or white supremacy. Rather, as political scientist Cathy Cohen contends, such struggles will maintain colonialism based on a politics of
secondary marginalization in which the most elite members of these groups will further their aspirations on the backs of those most marginalized within the community.

Fortunately, many indigenous and racial justice movements are beginning to see that addressing heteropatriarchy is essential to dismantling settler colonialism and white supremacy. The Native Youth Sexual Health Network, led by Jessica Yee, integrates queer analysis, indigenous feminism, and decolonization into its organizing praxis. Incite!, a national activist group led by radical feminists of color, similarly addresses the linkages between gender violence, heteropatriarchy, and state violence. And queer-of-color organizations such as the Audre Lorde Project have rejected centrist political approaches that demand accommodation from the state; rather, they seek to “queer” the state itself.

This queer interrogation of the “normal” is also present in more conservative communities. I see one such thread in evangelical circles—the emergent movement (or perhaps more broadly, the new evangelical movement). By describing the emergent movement as a queering of evangelicalism, I don’t necessarily mean that it offers an open critique of homophobia (although some emergent church leaders such as Brian McLaren have spoken out against homophobia). Rather, I see this movement as challenging of normalizing logics within evangelicalism.

This movement has sought to challenge the meaning of evangelicalism as being based on doctrinal correctness, and instead to imagine it a more open-ended ongoing theological conversation. Certainly the Obama presidential campaign has inspired many evangelicals—even though they may hold conservative positions on homosexuality or abortion—to call for a politics that is more open-ended and engaged with larger social justice struggles. Perhaps because of this trend, evangelical leader John Stackhouse recently complained that the biggest change in evangelicalism is “the collapse of the Christian consensus against homosexual marriage.” Unfortunately, many leftist organizers tend to dismiss or ignore these openings within evangelicalism, but at their own peril. Social transformation happens only through sustained dialogue with people across social, cultural, and political divides.

As I have shown here, I believe queer politics offers both a politics and a method for furthering social transformation. It is a politics that addresses how heteropatriarchy serves to naturalize all other social hierarchies, such as white supremacy and settler colonialism. It is also a method that organizes around a critique of the “normal” (in society as a whole or in social movements) and engages in open-ended, flexible, and ever-changing strategies for liberation.

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**Reading 35**

**Queering Black Female Heterosexuality**

Kimberly Springer (2008)

How can black women say yes to sex when our religious institutions, public policy, home lives, media, musical forms, schools, and parents discuss black women's sexuality only as a set of negative consequences? When mentioned at all, the words I recall most associated with black female sexuality were edicts against being "too fast." "Oooh, that girl know she fas'!" my aunt will say as the neighborhood "bad girl" swished on by. Just looking too long at a boy could provoke the reprimand "Girl, stop being so fas'." Notably, it was only us girls who were in danger of being labeled "fast." Women in church, passing through the hairdressers, and riding by in cars with known playas were simply dismissed. They