In February 1998, the cover story of Out Magazine was an “exclusive” interview wherein Angela Davis publicly came out as a lesbian. In the years since, she has continued to maintain her right to privacy about her romantic life, but she has been a vocal advocate for a coalitional and intersectional feminism inclusive of lesbian, bisexual, trans, and other queer women.

When one looks at her classic study *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), though, there is not much of a trace of Davis’s embrace of either her own queerness or the role the LGBTQ+ subjects could have played in the long history she recounts. The main question for me is: Should there be traces of queerness in that study just because the author now identifies as lesbian? Certainly some aspects of *Women, Race, and Class* do read as “queer” to me, meaning that they trouble the fixed containers of social identity and thus disrupt heteronormative norms and other social conventions that consolidate power asymmetries along the lines of gender and sexuality. Just as one example, Davis’ exposition in Chapter One of how the conditions forced upon enslaved African and African American women fostered disruptions of “the nineteenth-century ideology of womanhood” (p.11) is one such instance. “The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology. Male-female relations within the slave community could not, therefore, conform to the dominant ideological pattern” (p.12). Such a moment could be invaluable for rethinking the common presupposition that queerness—often cast now as the transitive verb *queering*—is an agentic and performative mode of disruption and resistance. In the context of a slavery system, Davis’s auxiliary verb phrase “could not,” in the passage quoted above, is crucial. In black historical experience, “queering” just as often might be a product of social and economic conditions as it is a willful resistance to ideologies, normative roles, and cultural or social practices. That is one lesson reading *Women, Race, and Class* through a queer lens could help remind us of.

Or, perhaps our question ought to be: Should we even be looking for queerness in Davis’s text? Since *Women, Race, and Class* is a foundational text in the canon of coalitional and intersectional feminism, scholars like myself who work in queer studies and theory should be interested in exploring the possibilities of claiming—without appropriating and denaturing—the critical work Davis performs here. However, how much of reading the study queerly would depend on approaching it anachronistically and retrospectively, in light of Davis’s later personal revelation about her sexuality? Wouldn’t that be a form of violence, a violation of the integrity of the text and the activist and intellectual work it and its author performs? I am particularly sensitive to such issues, given my archival work on the activist-poet Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), who late in her life disidentified from both liberal feminism and, later, gay and lesbian liberation even though she lived—as a kind of open secret—as a bisexual (or pansexual) woman who challenged patriarchal systems. Ought we even claim such formative figures who actively disavowed, whether for a period or for the entirety of their lives and careers, any affiliation of either their intellectual and aesthetic work or their social justice activism with identity-based gender and sexuality movements?
In *Epistemologies of the Closet* (1990), a foundational text in queer theory, Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick warns of how the paradigm of the closet reinforces heteronormative dynamics. To read a text to detect how the author may have closeted queerness, signaling it covertly, risks violating that text and its author. One would be acting like the very heteronormative, patriarchal, heterosexist, and homo- and transphobic social system one wishes to disrupt. In her later essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You” (1997; rev. and posthumously repub. 2003), Sedgwick implicitly recirculates those warnings by cautioning scholars and activists against adhering to “paranoid” attitudes, beliefs that one must always be postured to resist and fight because the world is out to do us harm. In contrast, a “reparative” mode—which Sedgwick leaves ill-defined—would mean keeping oneself open to happy surprises, which out of necessity also will be painful. Anything that breaks everyday habits and routines and preconceptions is disruptive and thus painful, even if it eventually leads to an amelioration of one’s conditions.

One argument for being open to a queer reading of *Women, Race, and Class*, then, would be to keep ourselves open to the surprises such readings might afford to help reshape our current ideas and practices of coalition and intersectionality. Such openness could lead to a reparative recasting of our activism, theorizations, art, and public intellectualism (including our teaching). We need to rethink these foundations, continually. That is especially true in a world where our voices are often silenced, or others attempt to bully us into silence. A recent, random email I received from a completely unknown person exemplifies this for me. “Is it possible to straighten a queer text?” this stranger wrote, in a message lacking salutation, signature, or context. Perhaps I’m just being paranoid, but I read this message as a microaggression—a homophobic invocation of conversion therapy, couched in a kind of trolling email and directed at a queer studies/queer theory scholar of some note and public visibility. Even if it were not intended that way, in the present political and cultural climate such a decontextualized message reads that way to someone like myself who personally has been subject to similar emails, institutional microaggressions, and actual hate crimes. So, I’m interested in the idea that Angela Davis may have something queer to tell me. I don’t want to “straighten” this text, and I definitely don’t want to “straighten”—i.e., push back into the silence and darkness of the closet—literature, artworks, and other cultural works (including histories like Davis’s) by out LGBTQ+ artists.

All the same, I think we must be cautious of overly queering *Women, Race, and Class*. To read as “queer” Davis’s exploration of how black feminism historically established coalitional ties across labor, gender, and racial divides could do violence to the study’s premise. Inadvertently, queering the text also might denature the activism Davis’s early intellectual work has helped inform. Such interpretive violence would gloss the fact that Davis had opportunities to expressly link her study to existing LGBTQ+ efforts and politics. Yet, she chose not to do so. On a certain level, if we are true to the text and its author’s intentions, we must respect her decision not to make that connection, at a particular moment—between Stonewall and before the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis—when much LGBTQ+ activism was cultural and intellectual in nature, invested in a recovery of queer political, social, and cultural history that affirmed the day’s political efforts.
And it was a decision to treat nonconforming gender and sexuality identities not only implicitly (if that) in *Women, Race, and Class*, but also to keep those constructs out of the title altogether. It would be a different book if it were titled *Women, Race, Class, and Sexuality*. But it is not unimaginable that Davis *could* have written such a book, regardless of her own sexual experience, expression, or identification.

Famously, Huey Newton had published a letter in 1970 in the Oakland paper *Black Panther* to encourage other radical black nationalist activists to set aside their homophobia and to recognize the struggle of, and to form coalitions with, the gay and lesbian liberation movement, which was beginning to emerge in the wake of the previous year’s Stonewall uprising. It is believed that French homosexual literary writer and anti-imperialist activist Jean Genet, during his brief visit to the United States to support the Black Panthers, is the one who persuaded Newton to make that communiqué. During that visit, Angela Davis met Genet. In 1991, seven years before her *Out* interview appeared and one decade after *Women, Race, and Class* was published, she remarked about Genet’s significance for trying to forge a coalition between black and LGBTQ+ politics. Clearly this moment between Newton and Genet had made a lasting impact on her, but it does not seem to inform the coalitional imaginary of *Women, Race, and Class*. What do we do with this fact?

And what do we do with the fact that the gay and lesbian liberation movement did not begin as a form of identity politics, so that that could not have been Davis’s rationale for dampening the visibility of sexuality in her recounting of coalitional resistance? Coalition actually was at the heart of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF)’s radicalism. Identity politics emerged in the mid-1970s, as the GLF lost its force, due to internal divisions and competing agendas, and began to be surpassed by the liberal identity politics of the Gay Activists Alliance. The GLF, though, had characterized its mission as a fight against sexism in all its forms, defining “sexism” as the systemically patriarchal and what we now would call heteronormative biases believed to be the basis not just for homophobia, heterosexism, and gender conformity, but also for white supremacism and imperialism. (In time, for some GLF activists, because of the higher incidences of incarceration of LGBTQ+ persons—since gender and sexual nonconformity were criminalized—a critique of sexism also would be linked to a critique of the military-industrial-prison complex, not unlike Davis’s anti-carceral activism.) The GLF’s anti-sexist program was rigorously theorized by particular cells within the movement’s New York City branch, particularly the Marxist cell known as Red Butterfly and the cell headed by persons of color known as Third World Gay Revolution. As an African American openly working in a Marxist tradition, was Angela Davis aware of those local activist developments? Is *Women, Race, and Class* a way of responding to the idea that sexism, rather than white supremacism, is the foundational root of all social injustice in the United States? Or, does she not openly address LGBTQ+-related matters because she herself was subject to state surveillance and even incarceration for her radical ideology?

Those questions become even more complicated if we consider the fact that the phrase “black feminism” signified in a specific way when Davis was researching and writing *Women, Race, and Class*. With the founding of the Combahee River Collective in 1974, an activist organization of self-identified lesbians of color, the basis for what we now call intersectionality had been established. The concept was eloquently and importantly theorized in that group’s famous 1978
statement. Is such a model of queer feminist intersectionality, in which every person singularly embodies various social identities and thus experiences “interlocking systems of oppression” differently, at odds with the Marxist foundations of Davis’s thought? Black feminist poet Audre Lorde, who would be affiliated with the Combahee River Collective and would co-found their publishing organ Kitchen Table, seems to exemplify the possible truth of such a supposition. As Lorde famously theorized in “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1978), social transformation starts with the reformation of social bonds and intimacies through personal experiences of eroticism, which have the potential to refigure ideas of community and power asymmetries. But is such a model of intersectionality rooted in personal politics so different from the schema Davis envisions in Chapter 10 of Women, Race, and Class? In that anomalous section, she devotes her attention to individual women’s stories—each woman’s story told in a distinct, subtitled section of the chapter. This anomaly to a text that is otherwise largely a people’s history is even more significant because of the chapter’s title: “Communist Women”! Here communism, a political ideology privileging economic class (or even social class) narratives, is offset by an emphasis on narratives about exemplary individual activists. Nothing seems expressly or covertly erotic about these stories, though. Is this writing strategy also political one, a rethinking of, or maybe a response to, the intersectional and coalitional formations of (queer) personal politics that Lorde and her Combahee sisters were doing, outside the parameters of eroticism and sexuality?

Ultimately, for me, there is no final answer to the question of the presence of queer traces in Angela Davis’s study, or even if we should look for them there. Nonetheless, what remains important are the fact that that the text of Women, Race, and Class—as a written intellectual and activist engagement—should provoke such questions and pitch us back into the historical moment when Davis researched and wrote her book. Such questions can throw new light on our political history and thus implicitly can inform and reform our political present. From an activist vantage, one purpose of historical studies is to prompt new queries about the past and the resultant investigations should compel new, and sometimes painful and ultimately irresolvable, reflections on the present state of activist affairs. So, what does coalition and intersectionality look like now to us, once we restate Davis’s project in relationship to what was going on as she developed and wrote it? Maybe queering this book is really just a matter of querying through it. That is, Davis helps us ask new questions about the nature of LGBTQ+ and coalitional and intersectional activism’s past, present, and future, and maybe those questions could prove fruitful for our efforts—as thinkers, scholars, teachers, artists, and activists—to dismantle a system that continues to dehumanize, disadvantage, disenfranchise, injure, and even murder its most vulnerable citizens, residents, and migrants.