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## “Uneasy Hinges” and “Secret Signals”

Sarah Ruddy  
sjbruddy@gmail.com

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*Queer Pollen: White Seduction, Black Male Homosexuality, and the Cinematic* by David A. Gerstner. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011. Pp. 304. \$95.00 cloth, \$27.00 paper.

David A. Gerstner's *Queer Pollen*—subtitled *White Seduction, Black Male Homosexuality, and the Cinematic*—examines the role of the cinematic in inventing the textual selves of the twentieth-century artists Richard Bruce Nugent, James Baldwin, and Marlon Riggs. The volume casts the queer textual practices of each of the three authors in terms of the cinematic in order to reveal what Gerstner calls the “secret signals” and “uneasy hinges,” perhaps other words for seduction, that whiteness engenders in each. What we find is “the *presence* of authorship,” a kind of relational resistance to the various ideologies doing battle in modern queer black cultural production (9, his emphasis). Further, Gerstner poses the central question about such *presence*: “In what way do the authorial gestures of black queers make present what Marx once called the ‘invisible threads of production’ in white Western-industrialized culture?” (10).

A similar challenge, to conceive of whiteness, and in turn blackness, as *spatial*, is posed in the Baldwin chapter (106). As such, Gerstner looks less at “queer whiteness”/“queer blackness” or “white queer culture”/“black queer culture” as oppositional than he does at how the cinematic, as a method of cultural production, enables these artists to dissolve one into the other such that the seeds of this *dissolution* remain in evidence on the textual/

filmic surface. Gerstner defines the cinematic as “an aesthetic concept—one that allowed for an envisioning of dynamic modern space and time—and an industrial apparatus that formalized these conceptualizations through the discrete properties the camera-machine offers” (15). In its aim to “investigate what is at stake in the production of queer black identity when the cinematic is put to use,” Gerstner’s project calls for a new sensual language, named the *cinematic*, that productively rhymes with current work in the sensory ethnography practices of multimedia and academic digital humanities. Fittingly, then, instead of imposing theory on this varied body of work, Gerstner looks at the works and artists individually in an attempt to find, through entangling their textual/cinematic practices, readable and portable aesthetic processes that will become a sort of transitory theory. The author stresses the cultural agency constructed “in the modes of (messy) aesthetic production that black queers choose when they assert their lived experiences through the work of art” (13).

Gerstner is careful to address “the different aesthetic and industrial registers” through which the cinematic filters into the works of Nugent, Baldwin, and Riggs (15). Thus, it is important to frame Nugent’s work as relying less upon the “cinematic as an industrial tool and more as a modernist

sensibility.” Framing the chapter in this way is both necessary and useful, but also limiting because it discourages readers from making productive connections to the works of the later artists; if there is a precedent set anywhere in queer black literary history for such a thing as a postmodern, retroactive blackness tooled by the dissolution of white queerness, it’s here, where through Nugent we discover queer Harlem as a “mobile” and “sensorial” experience (21). Nugent’s movements, his walks through Harlem, simultaneously look back at the modernist flaneur and forward to “cruising” culture as ways to enact “otherness” in “culturally inscribed repetitions” of difference (28). Throughout his work, Gerstner notes, such inscriptive repetitions take sensorial forms when “light, color, smell and sound traverse Nugent’s queer bodies”; in turn, these inscriptions are how Nugent “marshals the haptic through [the] queerly eroticized cinematic dissolves” of the mobile and sensorial textual self (48). Perhaps the most radically queer idea in Gerstner’s text is his assertion of the cinematic, through careful readings of Nugent’s spatial practices, as a space “where one *can* love” (52, his emphasis), queerly. Through his mobilization of the sensorial, sensual experience of queerness within white/black space, across

its surface, refusing to disperse, Nugent—"in every sensational suggestion"—"sharply homosexualizes what the industry could only homoeroticize" (63). Nugent thus introduced the "secret signal" of a sensory aesthetic into the industrial medium of the cinematic in a way that resonates strongly throughout the following chapters.

James Baldwin's contribution to the development traced in *Queer Pollen* is framed by "the light and the dark," the next step that black queer movement takes as it dissolves into Gerstner's concept of the cinematic. In "the distinctive properties" of the cinema itself, the flickering light and darkness of the filmic grain, "are where Baldwin's queerness and queer subjectivity move between the gradations of black and white" (73). In other words, "the flash of cinematic revelation," as readers of Marcel Proust, Walter Benjamin, and Eduardo Cadava might already suspect, "a brief self-realization that flickers like the shadows on the screen, has residual consequences for [Baldwin's] characters' place in the world" (74). Reading after Kevin Ohi, Gerstner calls this flash of cinematic revelation "revelation's failure," where the lie of an "irreducible," singular self is revealed to be "the truth of performance." Although I found Gerstner's characterization of this complex

phenomenology as "an experimental aesthetic" overly simple, it nonetheless leads to reading the cinematic in Baldwin's work as an affectively produced, experiential new language (77) wherein flickering registers as affective corporeal movement across bodies, not unlike Nugent's inscriptive repetitions. Considering Baldwin in these terms corresponds usefully to more recent queer work in the field of affect theory by, say, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, suggesting that Baldwin's radical queerness manifested subtly but powerfully in exactly his cinematic conceptualizations of corporeality.

This "dispersion of cinematic bodies in space and time" calls into question the efficacy and indeed ethics of realism as an adequate language for the black queer "now" (102). Baldwin looks to the *grain* of film to continuously disrupt the illusory identifications of the now such that the temporal sequence

—the inaccuracy of memory in its futile command of the "real"—crumbles not merely the verisimilitude of an authentic "now" . . . but incapacitates the capacity of language to describe with accuracy the experiential moment that, for Baldwin . . . cannot be accessed through an aesthetic assigned as "realism" (action follows action) (102).

This attack on realist aesthetics from inside the grain of the filmic or cinematic itself—that is, queerness as the disruptive bodily/affective force emerging from within forms—made it impossible at the time for critics like Irving Howe to assimilate queerness into New Critical formalism. The industrial apparatus of the cinematic *as* an aesthetic concept casting queerness as the *indis-solute, unassimilable*, leads with increasing urgency to Marlon Riggs.

At the outset (and in keeping with “the grain”), I would have liked a more thorough treatment of film versus video as a cinematic medium in Riggs’s work in the 1980s and 1990s, given what video was doing then in terms of activist cultural work, especially among queers and, more specifically, in AIDS activism. Most but not all of Riggs’s work was shot on 16-mm film but, especially in the context of 1990s’ AIDS cinematic activism, video was such a hugely important development that the fact of 16 mm shouldn’t be assumed—it should be explicitly addressed. There is a crucial distinction between film and video when it comes to both the texture of the cinematic surface and the material treatment the media undergo to produce the dissolve. Why would Riggs choose 16-mm film over video? Fruitful discussion points arise when we consider the aesthetic/industrial separation

and reconvergence in terms of the materiality of the dissolve.

And yet this is not to say that the Riggs chapter is not fascinating and challenging, especially in Gerstner’s early invocation of the terms “autoethnography” (from José Esteban Muñoz [141, 248]) and “performative documentary” (from Bill Nichols [141 and often thereafter]). It is within this framework, actual documentary film production, that Gerstner’s discussion of the aesthetic politics of “re/disfiguration” is most salient. And although I was puzzled by the division between fact-based documentary and sensual/sensory poetics (143), given that ultimately this seems to be a book that argues (at least in part) for sensory documentary as the basis for a poetics of queer factuality, this division may be necessary in order for the work of re/disfiguration to develop. Readers are faced with the argument that *responsibility*, an assumed feature of the fact-based documentary, is no more than another affective performance serving false consciousness and thus that the re/disfiguration of responsibility by the sensory is a necessary principle of Riggs’s documentary filmmaking. Riggs, at his most postmodern, argues for irresponsibility to push back, through sensual cinematics, against humanism. “Irresponsible documentary” thus produces antirealist presentation as “retroactive becoming” (166), where irresponsibility figures

on the filmic surface as queer in the way that—and here Gerstner quotes Leo Bersani—“male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self,” as technically happens in the industrial space of the dissolve (184, Bersani’s emphasis). The “device of the cinematic dissolve,” then, *is* Riggs’s retroactive becoming and also where the incomplete dissolution, through retroactive becoming, of both blackness and queerness leaves “pollen” as a mediator on the textual surface. As Gerstner writes, the dissolve is, finally, “the cinematic trope that mediates [Riggs’s] experience of corporeal deterioration and the debris of histories and cultures through which his queer black body emerges” (209).

*Queer Pollen* is a dense text but not without astonishing insight and rich rewards. A clearer treatment of the differences between the registers of fictional and nonfictional cinematic, leading to the intersection of these modes in Riggs’s statement of documentary theory, might have served as a guide through some of the denser—but extremely perceptive—readings. Yet, this conflation also posed unexpected questions about black, queer space and its movement across realist narratological and phenomenological boundaries in its very *refusal* to dissolve completely. Indeed, this *presence* itself is, Gerstner writes, “an active agent (and an act of agency)

instrumental to a queer black sensual world” (7). He continues, “I place three black queers side by side to enlist the historical repetitions, interaesthetic relationships, and political variations they come to represent and through which they are conjoined.” Such repetitions and variations, and the way each “configures multimedia properties with historical material affect” (17), point to Gerstner’s desire to use black queer aesthetic practices to go beyond modernist readings of the cinematic—wherein the separation of aesthetic and industry, whose rejoining in the montage informed the works of Sergei Eisenstein, Langston Hughes, Dziga Vertov, and Romare Bearden—to the gradual dissolution of these modes into “the power of the false” (18), postmodern re/disfigured corporeal multimedia—that is, *queer*—modes. Gerstner thus recasts queer double consciousness as nondialectical, showing it as the mobile, *dissolving*, *dissolution* of productive multi(media) consciousnesses that create a “vocabulary for the now” (137). On this basis, Gerstner first cites Howe’s critique of Baldwin:

Frequently he is detached from and in opposition to other blacks; unavoidably he must find himself troubled by his relationship to the whole looming tradition of Western literature, which is both his and not

entirely his; and sooner or later he must profoundly wish to get away from *racial polemic and dialectic*, simply in order to reach, in his own lifetime, *some completeness of being* . . . so that he now suffers from the most disastrous psychic conditions—a separation between *his feelings and his voice*. (122, Howe's emphasis)

Riggs, on the other hand, performs mobile double consciousness as a "reckoning with this double bind" that may never be completed, that instead of being *resolved* is continuously *dissolved*: "To be at once the producer of transformed ideologies and the one (ideologically) produced—is precisely the fraught dynamic (black is . . . black ain't; queer is . . . queer ain't) that constitutes the 'power of the false'" (211). Experiencing double consciousness in this way—*after* Baldwin—Riggs wrote in 1991,

James Baldwin, renowned black American homosexual novelist and essayist, once wrote that the general aim of white Americans was to refashion the Negro face after their own, and failing that, to make the black face "blank." Straight America, black well as white, has demanded much the same of homosexual men and

women: to win majority acceptance, we are asked to represent ourselves in ways which, in effect, reaffirm the majority's self-image of privilege. The alternative is our wholesale erasure. . . . But there is another alternative, and for many this was the real outrage of *Tongues Untied*, and for many, many more, its principal virtue: the refusal to present an historically disparaged community on bended knee, begging courteously for tidbits of mainstream tolerance. What *Tongues* instead unapologetically affirms and delivers is a frank, uncensored, uncompromising articulation of an autonomously defined self and social identity. SNAP!<sup>1</sup>

*Sarah Ruddy earned her doctorate in Literary and Cultural Studies from Wayne State University in 2012; her academic work focuses on the intersection of poetics, documentary studies, and modern American visual culture. She has worked as an associate producer of independent and experimental documentary film projects, as the head producer of the Camden International Film Festival, and as a consulting producer at both Northeast Historic Film and Maine Media Workshops. She lives in Boston and teaches experimental literature and composition to high school students.*

#### NOTE

1. Marlon Riggs, "Commentary on *Tongues Untied*," *Current*, August 12, 1991.