BOOK REVIEWS

Curiouser: On the queerness of children. Bruhm, S., & Hurley, N. (Eds.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. (2004) 408 pp., $22.95

Essays, some classic and others new, by scholars of childhood and sexuality have been brought together in *Curiouser: On the queerness of children,* edited by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley. These essays explore what happens when our culture‟s common perceptions of children as innocent and heterosexual devoid of sexual desires are questioned. The contributors, which include professors of English, cultural studies, philosophy, and gender studies, challenge the reader to consider queer childhood intentions in a variety of formats, such as advertising, media, religion, fictional literature, and girls‟ and boys‟ clubs.

Bruhm and Hurley set the stage for the reader by stating that this collection of essays "examine[s] the complex stories that arise from the field of child sexuality, and in particular their relation to the queer…" (p. ix). The text is based largely on queer theory, which is a relatively new theoretical speculation. Queer theory grew out of the gay/lesbian studies and feminist studies of the 1980s. Viewing sexuality as socially constructed, ideas about sexuality often take the form of moral statements. For example, what forms of sexuality are culturally appropriate and not acceptable. How we view sexuality has shifted over time. This supports the argument that it is bendable and can be manipulated. Queer theory insists that sexual behaviors, sexual identities, and categories of normative and deviant sexualities are socially constructed and create social meaning.

Gayle Rubin, a prominent queer theorist to whom *Curiouser* defers, argues for the separation of sexual behavior from moral judgment. This radical perspective has many opponents, who protest that some kinds of sexual behavior are wrong (i.e., rape). These objections show that in our culture, sexuality and sexual behavior are often about something more than pleasure and reproduction. Dominance, for instance, is often an issue. Some view the links between sexual activities and notions of morality as powerful. That‟s what makes this book puissant. It takes the reader‟s culturally infiltrated perceptions of youth and shakes them up: to question society‟s view of children as innocent and corruptible.

In the simple stories of each essay of *Curiouser*, the child is transformed into a metaphor for a normative adult life as these narratives of sexuality are revealed. As readers make their way through the works of James Kincaid, Richard Mohr, and twelve other contributors, they will become "curiouser and curiouser" as Alice did in her adventures in Wonderland.

The book is presented in two sections. First, "Sexing the Child" includes essays on child sexuality. It begins with the classic work of James Kincaid, which proposes that erotic children are manufactured by society as we are taught to crave that which is forbidden. The phenomenon of child sexuality, Kincaid argues, is everywhere (i.e., magazines, news media, talk shows). Richar Mohr‟s essay, which follows Kincaid‟s, highlights media portrayals of the innocence and sexuality of children. He refers to Calvin Klein‟s and Tommy Hilfinger‟s uses of young, innocent, half-naked boys in their advertisements as the "pedophilia of everyday life" (p. 17). Michael Moon‟s essay questions eroticism in Horatio Alger‟s classic nineteenth-century American literature. He suggests that Alger‟s rags-to-riches storylines indulge in pedophilic desires. This section is

then rounded out by the writings of Lauren Berlant on live sex acts, Kevin Ohi on Henry James‟s texts, and Ellis Hanson‟s look at the 1973 William Friedkin film *The Exoricist.* All suggest that childhood innocence is an oxymoron. They illustrate what is at stake in thinking about children and sexuality.

The second section of *Curiouser*, “The Queers We Might Have Been,” focuses on the significance of the queerness of children. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick‟s essay informs the reader that young gays and lesbians are “two to three times more likely than other young people to attempt and to commit suicide” (p. 139). Her essay proceeds to examine how to “bring your kids up gay” (p. 139) by attending to issues concerning open season on effeminate boys in our society. The following essays are said to have been made possible by Sedgwick‟s foregrounding of queerness in children. Paul Kelleher and Kathryn Kent look at the institutionalization of the queer child by way of the psychoanalyst‟s couch and Girl Scout camp. Next, Judith Halberstam and Michael Warner share memoirs of their own childhoods to indicate how queer culture is infused by one‟s upbringing, class, gender deviance, and religion. Halberstam looks at female masculinity or the “tomboy” (p. 191), while Warner professes he was a “teenage Pentecostalist” (p. 215). The reader is then confronted by possibly the most disconcerting, if you will, essays by Andre Furlani and Eric Savoy. Through the works of Guy Davenport and Henry James, these contributors query issues of orgies, masturbation, and virginity. Savoy‟s interprets Henry James‟s *The Turn of the Screw* (1891) using queer theory; he sees the entire structural topography of the text as constituted by corruption and homosexuality while Furlani marks the guise of pastoral utopias in Davenport‟s stories as harmful to self-knowledge and sexual exploration. The way is paved for Kathryn Bond Stockton‟s finale. Stockton argues that children “[grow] sideways” (p. 277). She hypothesizes versions of the queer child; namely, the ghostly gay child, the grown homosexual, the child queered by Freud, the child queered by innocence, and the interval of animal.

Some readers will find this book offensive. Some will not be able to finish reading it as it takes the everyday cultural perceptions and creations of childhood, innocence, and sexuality and places them in a new light. Others will welcome its radicalism and new insight and enjoy its look at past and modern-day popular culture. In parts, readers might feel they are witnessing an unpleasant accident but cannot turn away. In others, the reader questions the state of affairs in our society and what should be done about them. If nothing else, after reading the essays in *Curiouser,* one will look more carefully and critically at the interpretation of texts and media as this book helps us to re-think our own identities, opinions, and positions on society, our culture, and the queerness of children. Upon reflection, readers will discover they have become even more “curiouser and curiouser”.

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White Queen: May French-Sheldon and the Imperial Origins of American Feminist Identity by Tracey Jean Boisseau. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 280 pp., $21.95

Long before Madonna there was May French-Sheldon, who became a celebrity through shrewdly marketing her unique experiences and shaping her public persona. Her first claim to fame was as an explorer in Africa in 1891. She came into the limelight at a time when the United States was emerging as a world power and the word "feminist" was being introduced in popular discourse.

May French-Sheldon was born in Pennsylvania in 1847 and died at the age of 89. She was an adventurous, resourceful person from a somewhat privileged background who thrived on public attention and approval. Ironically, she was most successful in cultivating celebrity in her later years. Much of her life was spent in England, where her second husband facilitated her desire to embark upon a three month trip to the Kilimanjaro region of East Africa. Her expedition was remarkable because she was unaccompanied by any white males (but depended upon 150 African guides and porters). Her descriptions of the trip led to her reputation as Africa"s first white woman explorer. During the 1890"s French-Sheldon exaggerated her modestly successful expedition by portraying herself as a much desired, yet forceful white "adventuress" in the midst of lusty yet easily-manipulated African natives. Hers was a powerful narrative that complemented the prejudices of her contemporaries.

French-Sheldon went on to present herself as an authority on African life and business opportunities on the „dark continent". She subsequently conducted a dubious investigation of conditions in the Belgian Congo, where she gathered information that was intended to repudiate many legitimate allegations of King Leopold"s murderous policies. Her last venture in Africa was an aborted entrepreneurial scheme to make a fortune in Liberia through the efforts of African- American expatriates who she planned to recruit in the United States.

The story of this extraordinary woman is delightful in and of itself. Tracey Jean Boisseau tells of French-Sheldon"s calculated ambition and accomplishments with perception, wit and irony. But Boisseau"s research makes for much more than a wonderful read. The author, now Assistant Professor of History at the University of Akron, has deconstructed French-Sheldon"s life story as a historical case study to show how and why a particular ideal of liberated womanhood won out over other conceptions of feminism. She provides a theoretically rich explication of a particular stage in the sporadic development of the concept of feminism in America.

Many who identified themselves as "modern" women in the 1920"s came to view the aged French-Sheldon as an icon. Why? By today"s standards she was hardly a feminist. Boisseau"s title, "White Queen," suggests an image (of others, as well as French-Sheldon) that pleased and reassured growing numbers who implicitly came to accept an imperial vision of America"s national identity. That nascent sense of global destiny was linked to an ideal of feminism that glorified individualistic women, who gained fame by emulating „masculine" achievers (as compared to other ideal types such as political activists who successfully pursued socially progressive goals). As America"s national identity came to embrace (yet deny) an imperial mentality it also came to include the notion that this was the land where women would truly be emancipated.

At times this book reads as if it were a revised doctoral thesis (which it is).

Nonacademics may find some of the text abstruse but still appreciate the significance of French-Sheldon‟s life in terms of her impact upon, and (especially) her reflection of, America‟s evolving political culture. But what a fine thesis! Academics with any interest in feminist theory will enthusiastically welcome this work. Boisseau has elevated the standard for case studies in historical research. Among many insights she suggests how the development of feminist thought in America was partly nourished with racial prejudice, national chauvinism, and celebrity worship. This is a sobering and worthwhile consideration for those who are committed to the pursuit of equal rights in the 21st century.

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Crimson Moon by Lucha Corpi. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2004, 177 pp., $12.95.

Lucha Corpi has written an engaging mystery which, in addition to telling a very readable story, educates the reader on the Chicano counter-revolutionary movements in California and Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s.

There are several plot lines, which turn out to have their origin in events in the Chicano struggle. One family, the Saucedos, is looking for the unknown grandfather of their granddaughter in hopes that he or a relative will be a bone marrow donor for the infant. Another woman, Ramona Serna, the grandmother of the little girl, is looking for a writer to tell the story of her involvement in the movement. She finds a writer, Vincent Constantino, but he has now disappeared, and his sister Beatrice is looking for him. Justin Escobar, of the Brown Angel Security and Investigations Agency, is looking for the grandfather. Dora Saldana is looking for Vincent; she has just been asked by Justin and his partner Gloria to join Brown Angel.

The plot lines come together with the revelation that a former ATF agent, Ron Patterson, had a nasty habit of raping woman who were involved in the Chicano movements. “Pretty Boy” Patterson had raped Ramona Serna, who was the biological mother of the Saucedo granddaughter. After almost thirty years of trying, and often failing, to bury the rape, she now has decided that her story needed to be told. When Vincent Constantino learns that Ramona was only one of many women similarly raped, he tracks down Jesse Latour, a young Chilean-American living in Denver who is the son of Patterson and Felicia Latour, a Chilean student studying in the United States years ago. Justin and Dora realize that all roads lead to Patterson.

Because of the years which have gone by, Patterson cannot be prosecuted for the rapes. Dora, however, releases the information to the newspapers, and Patterson‟s plans to run for Congress end with his suicide.

In many ways, this story is a typical mystery. There are crimes, good guys and bad guys, and plots with twists. It is more dramatic than cozy, but less violent than many police procedurals or Elmore Leonard-type stories. Today, it is not unusual to find women detectives, so in that sense Dora Saldana is not atypical of the genre. What is different, of course, is that most of the major characters are Latino. Spanish phrases are interspersed throughout the book, some translated, some not. The Latino emphasis flows naturally, partly because the root events were the Chicano movement and the people involved in it,

and partly because it is not uncommon for persons of similar ethnic background to feel most at ease with each other. While mention is made of racist characters, it is in the context of the story, not an interruption of it. The worst „bad guy" is one ofthe few Caucasians in the story, but at the same time, the Latinos range over the natural spectrum of human behavior.

There are many other writers who set their stories within specific cultural contexts; Tony Hillerman, Dana Stabenow and Barbara Hambly come to mind. These authors, including Corpi, educate their readers at the same time as they entertain them. Readers learn something about the experiences and reactions to life through characters of Chicano culture. These mysteries have particular traits in common, e.g. someone usually dies, but they are all distinct, in that the food, language, habits, etc. vary depending on the culture. And all of them portray their characters as individuals, not just stereotypes of an ethnic group.

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Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique by Roderick A. Ferguson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. 175 pp, paperback $ 18.95

Despite Ferguson"s modest title, this slight volume is a genuinely original work which not only takes on "canonical sociology" as heteronormative and racist, but offers an alternative method of social analysis. At its core *Aberrations in Black* relates the complex tale of how both liberal capitalist political economy and historical materialism have made gender and sexual normativity central to theories of social transformation. Ferguson makes an „epistemological intervention," through his queer of color analysis, one in which he retains an interest in "materiality," but „refuses ideologies" that have assisted in the construction of Marxism, revolutionary nationalism, and liberal pluralism. He identifies these ideologies as deeply responsible for myriad class and racial exclusions, and is inspired more by Foucault and Althusser than other thinkers. He also presumes that liberal ideology" occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class" in forming social practices.

In addition to a rigorous critique of „canonical sociology," Ferguson lays out three main arguments which comprise his „queer of color critique." The first argument explores the contradictory process through which classical liberalism and Marxism ended up blaming social disorder on non-heteronormative populations. Thus, he argues for a revision of historical materialism and the need to „disidentity" with it. Marx, he argues, was just as committed as liberals to ideas about being human that "took normative heterosexuality as the emblem of order, nature, and universality, making that which deviated from heteropatriarchal ideals the sign of disorder." (6) Because Marx equated capitalism with artificial forms of desire (i.e., rampant commodification), he saw "capital" as spreading social disorder and sexual transgressions; they signified capital"s disruptive efforts.

Ferguson‟s second argument is thoroughly Foucauldian, linking the „multiplication of racialized discourses of sexuality and gender" to the multiplication of labor under capital." (12) Employing Foucault‟s discourse of implanting "perversions" and the "dispersion of sexualities," he argues that nonwhite immigrant populations (Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans in the USA) grew in direct response to low wage labor demands, but their social positions and interactions with white and white ethnic Americans were regulated by a series of exclusionary policies. Ferguson demonstrates that more nuanced exclusions arose once racialized ethnic minorities were labeled as sexually perverse and gender deviant.

Writing within a „racial formation‟ framework, Ferguson describes the historical pathologization of immigrant communities of color and African Americans in contrast to the supposed puritanical hetero-normality of whites. Ferguson cleverly rescues this idea to construct an alternative narrative about the heterogeneity caused by capitalism. Building on Marx‟s idea of „surplus populations‟ Ferguson argues that "formations" which "transgress capitalist political economies, contain "surplus populations which become the (possible) site for "critiques of state and capital." (15)

This hopeful claim leads to Ferguson‟s third argument in which he proposes African American literature as an alternative body of knowledge to the sociological archive. He argues that literature possesses the potential to dispel universalist notions of the human as well as of culture "by referring to a gender and sexual multiplicity constitutive of African American culture." (26) While this "practice" is hardly new, Ferguson does a masterful job of presenting a real need for this approach. Each subsequent chapter involves a pairing of a sociological text or two with novels and essays by African American writers: (1) Conrad Bentzen, "Notes on the Homosexual in Chicago;" (2) Robert Park, *Race and Culture* and *The City*; (3) Gunnar Myrdal*, An American Dilemma;* (4*)* Daniel P. Moynihan‟s "The Negro Family;" These texts are contrasted with (1) Richard Wright„s *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, (2) Ralph Ellison‟s *Invisible Man*, (3) James Baldwin „s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and various essays, and (4) Toni Morrison‟s *Sula* and Audre Lorde‟s *Sister Outsider*). In this way fiction (and essays) is employed to expose the racial agenda of the purportedly objective, neutral sociological canon.

Despite some weaknesses in this text, i.e., Ferguson‟s economical writing sabotages his points with unsupported generalizations and his examples of „queers of color‟ are almost exclusively African American, this slight text is a genuine contribution to queer studies and cultural criticism.

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