

OCT08

NEWSLETTER OF THE
UCLA CENTER FOR THE
STUDY OF WOMEN

CSW
update

A Rage in Harlem

GENDER, CRIME, AND MIGRATION

by Courtney Marshall



A film of The Sport of the Gods was released in 1921.

DEBATES IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY concerning so-called Negro criminality represented African Americans as degenerate and unfit; the rise of the New Negro at the beginning of the century coincided with the invention of new Negro crime.¹ Historically, the media had used discourses of black criminality to argue for the inherent inferiority of African Americans and to justify increasing segregation and discrimination, and black authors responded in part by warning of the dangers of inner city life in their works.² As early as 1927, authors like Rudolph Fisher wrote stories about a criminal underworld which threatened to corrupt young migrants. Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), a novel thought to usher in the era of black naturalism, also showed the effect that fast city life has on

The black woman has the brain of a child and the passions of a woman steeped in centuries of ignorance and savagery, and wrapped about in immemorial vices. – ELEANOR TAYLEUR, “The Negro Woman: Social and Moral Decadence”

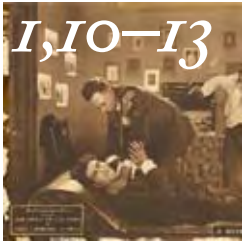
Now the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the retraining of the race, as well as the ground work and starting point of its progress upward, must be the black woman.
– ANNA JULIA COOPER, *A Voice From the South*

Harlem rightly has been judged hard-working, respectable, indubitably religious, a community keen to state and maintain its own respectability. It has also been a Harlem edged with crime and violence, whether from racketeering, narcotics, “hustle” in general, or the everyday abrasion of a people often made to feel pressured and boxed in to the point of implosion. – A. ROBERT LEE, “Harlem on My Mind: Fictions of a Black Metropolis”

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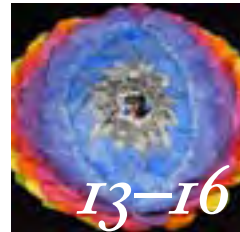
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7-9



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I3-I6



5-6

DEPARTMENTS



Of Pigs and Pit Bulls or Read my Lipstick...



Never, in recent memory at least, has a presidential campaign been so much about animals and cosmetics. With Sarah Palin, it's a zoo and an aquarium too. There are the animals she kills—moose, wolves—and the animals she says she is—barracuda and pit bull. To introduce herself to the American people at the Republican National Convention, she told a now oft repeated joke: “What is the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick,” and pointed at her own lips to secure the self-nomination. Several days later, Barack Obama made his own

animal and cosmetic reference by way of criticizing John McCain's assertion that he was the candidate of change. Citing McCain's similarity to George Bush on foreign policy, health care, domestic policy, the military, and use of Karl Rove campaign tactics, Obama observed that you can call the “same thing something different” but really it was the same; it was like putting “lipstick on a pig.” McCain and company seized on Obama's reference to lipstick—if it's cosmetics on an animal, it must mean Palin—and declared, with outrage, that Obama was calling Palin a pig. Both Palin and Obama's comments

had to do with difference; hers the difference between a class of women to which she belongs and vicious attack dogs; his between what McCain's policies are and what he and his campaign claims they are. Obama was talking policy; Palin was talking about herself. She was pointing at her own lips and saying, look here, read my lipstick. Let's do just that.

Palin's joke invoked a certain kind of middle-class maternity. A hockey mom shuttles kids to practice, cheers from the sidelines, cultivates a competitive ethos. Her reference to a pit bull joined the maternal, homey, domestic service inferences



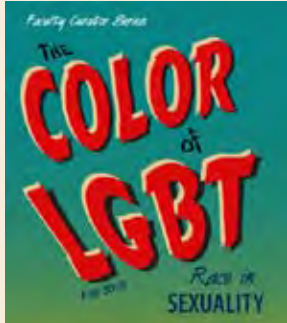
In pointing at her own lips, Palin clearly indicated that the difference to which she referred was both her own and any hockey mom's sexuality. Savage at heart, but pretty, sexual on the surface.

of “mom” with the pure aggression and savagery of an animal born and bred to attack. The difference? Cosmetic. In pointing at her own lips, Palin clearly indicated that the difference to which she referred was both her own and any hockey mom’s sexuality. Savage at heart, but pretty, sexual on the surface. Her audience went wild. And understandably so. American popular culture (and some Americans as well) tends to blur and often confuse aggression and sexuality. In her joke and in her recent comments to “put her heels on and take the gloves off,” Palin speaks to that blur; she embodies that confusion. And that embodiment pleases and excites others who share that confusion. What is more disturbing is the purpose to which this blurring has been put in the national arena, pitting a white woman against a black man. At the convention, Palin introduced herself as John McCain’s attack dog, and she went after her target, Barack Obama, from the moment she hit the stage. We all know about attack dogs and black men. But wait, she’s a

mother and all woman too! Palin’s lipstick comment both slapped the sex on the dog and implicitly warned against any quid pro quo, a warning the McCain campaign made explicit after the convention, saying that she needed to be treated “with deference.” Their use of this term was both contradictory and loaded. Who ever heard of a pit bull that needed to be treated with deference? Deference refers to the courteous respect and submission due to “ladies” and one’s social betters in outdated codes of gender, class, and, yes, racial etiquette. Reading Palin’s lipstick reveals a campaign stooping to play the race card with innuendo and plausible deniability by using female sexuality to mobilize acts of racial aggression. Pundits and the press supporting McCain perversely infer that this toxic mix of animals, sex, and aggression has something to do with feminism and legitimate power. But it’s just lipstick.

— **Kathleen McHugh**

The Color of LGBT: Race in Sexuality



FALL QUARTER'S FACULTY CURATOR SERIES WILL FEATURE
TALKS BY JASBIR PUAR, DAVID L. ENG, AND KATHRYN BOND STOCKTON

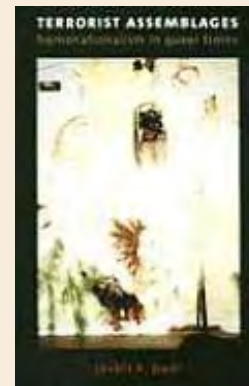
by Joseph Bristow

This fall's CSW Faculty Curator series, titled "The Color of LGBT: Race in Sexuality," addresses the complex ways in which debates surrounding cultural difference have emerged within the study of contemporary sexualities. During the past ten to fifteen years, the flourishing field of LGBT studies has become increasingly resistant to a number of normative assumptions about race and ethnicity in debates about the history and theory of dissident desires. The series brings together three leading scholars whose inquiries show

that questions of color necessarily inform analyses of eroticism in our world.

JASBIR PUAR

The first event on October 22 will feature Professor Jasbir Puar, who teaches at Rutgers University and who is the author of the remarkable *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke,



2007). Her incisive book focuses on the intersections of race and homosexuality in the politically fraught climate that followed 9/11. In particular, Puar concentrates on the development of "U.S. sexual exceptionalism," in which ideas about sexual citizenship enfold homosexual subjects into oppressive nationalistic formations. An important strand of her argument shows that in the recent past—an era marked by intense fears of terrorism—"homonational" identities enjoy increasing privilege because they have participated in the Islamophobia that

resulted in racial slurs and assaults. Her presentation, entitled “Prognosis Time: Pathologies of Terror,” will build on the findings of her book.

DAVID L. ENG



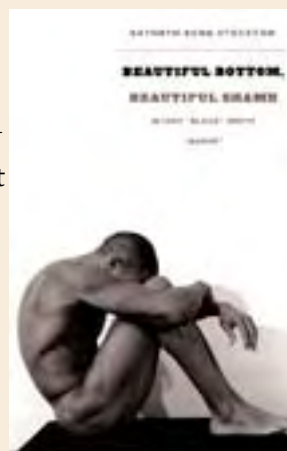
In his powerful study, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Duke UP, 2001), Professor David L. Eng argues that in modern culture race is a constitutive component

of the sexual psyche. Entitled “The Queer Space of China,” his presentation, which is based on a recent extended visit to Beijing, explores the reasons why Western models of homosexual identity are not always relevant to the ways in which dissident sexualities are taking shape in twenty-first-century China. Professor Eng teaches English, comparative literature, and Asian American studies at the University of Pennsylvania. His second book, *The Feeling of Kinship*, is forthcoming from Duke University Press.

During the past ten to fifteen years, the flourishing field of LGBT studies has become increasingly resistant to a number of normative assumptions about race and ethnicity in debates about the history and theory of dissident desires. The series brings together three leading scholars whose inquiries show that questions of color necessarily inform analyses of eroticism in our world.

KATHRYN BOND STOCKTON

Professor Kathryn Bond Stockton, who teaches English and gender studies at the University of Utah, is the author of *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer”* (Duke UP, 2006). This imposing book looks unflinchingly at the intersections of sexual and racial debasement in a broad span of cultural and literary documents, including Jean Genet’s *Querelle*, Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston*, Toni



Morrison’s *Sula*, and Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography. Her presentation, 'Oedipus Raced, or the Child Queered by Color,' is drawn from her current research on different versions of queer childhood experience.

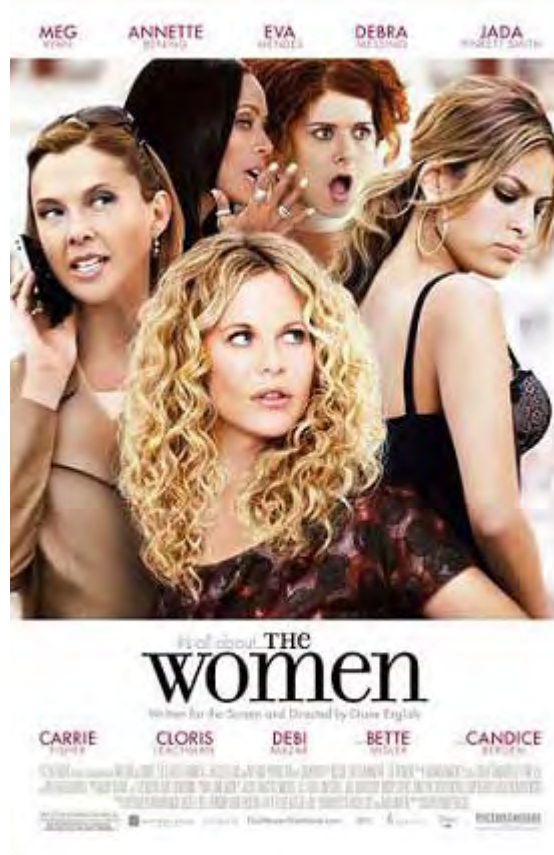
Joseph Bristow is a Professor in the Department of English at UCLA. His research interests include British writing and culture, 1830 to the present; theories and histories of sexuality; and Victorian drama, fiction, and poetry. The recipient of the CSW Faculty Curator Grant for Fall 08, Bristow organized “The Color of LGBT” speaker series. Puar will speak on Wednesday, October 22, in 314 Royce at 4 pm. Eng’s presentation is scheduled for Wednesday, November 5, in 314 Royce at 4 pm. Stockton’s talk is on Wednesday, December 3, in 193 Humanities at 4 pm.

the Women

WHAT HAS CHANGED?

by Ellen C. DuBois

The Women, Clare Boothe Luce's 1936 Broadway play and 1939 hit movie, is playing well right now in a big budget 2008 update. With all of its parts written for women and its wide variety of female roles and fabulous dialogue, it is irresistible to actresses. The 1939 version starred Norma Shearer as the luminous Mary Haines and Joan Crawford as the scheming Crystal Allen and Rosalind Russell as Mary's friend Sylvia Fowler and featured Paulette Goddard, Joan Fontaine, Marjorie Maine, and—the only African American in the movie and in her first movie role—Butterfly McQueen. The 2008 version stars Meg Ryan in the lead role of Mary, along with Candace Bergen, Cloris Leachman, Annette Benning, Eva Mendes, Debra Messing, Carrie Fisher, Bette Midler, and Debi Mazur. The only African American woman (doing double duty as the only lesbian) is Jada Pinkett Smith.



The Women

Picturehouse, 2008

Written and directed by
Diane English



The Women

MGM, 1939

Screenplay by Anita Loos

Based on the play by

Clare Boothe Luce

Directed by George Cukor

DVD release,

Warner Brothers, 2002

Clare Boothe Luce wrote *The Women* as if she knew what she was talking about, and she did. As “good” as wife Mary is, schemer Crystal has the author’s attention. Luce herself was a true crossover: moving from being an independent working woman of unclear origins to the wife of one of the most powerful men of the mid twentieth century. Clare Boothe was divorced and an editor at *Vogue* when Henry Luce left his wife to marry her. A year later, *The Women* opened on Broadway. She went on to be a two-term Congresswoman, ambassador to Italy, and a powerful figure in the rising Republican far right.

I expected to hate the 2008 version, but I did not anticipate its many pleasures. If you know the 1939 version, it is great fun to watch the filmmakers playing with their adaptation. Some great lines repeated in their pristine integrity play fabulously seventy years later. (Of Crystal: “She’s got those eyes that run up and down a man like a searchlight.”) The updating of the plot is fascinating. The last third of the 1939 version takes place in a divorce resort in Reno, Nevada, where Mary has gone to spend her necessary six weeks to get a quickie divorce. In the new version, Reno has undergone a makeover and is now a yoga resort (somewhere north of San Francisco, I imagine), where the same sort of women go for the same purpose of marking time as their marriages dissolve. The 1939 charac-



In 2008, the saving power of friendships among women is the ultimate romance. Annette Benning’s Sylvia (*left*) undergoes as much of a transformation as does Ryan’s Mary, as she regrets and atones for her disloyalty to her friend. Indeed, Sylvia becomes the most compelling character of the movie, no longer a plot device, foil for the heroine, or comic relief.

ter of the Countess, a comic character who continues to believe in the power of love despite her numerous divorces, is played this time by Bette Midler as a cynical Hollywood agent sneering as she preaches “l’amour, l’amour!”

Above all, *The Women* remains irresistible because the question it poses—can a woman be married and modern at the same time, can a woman, in other words, have it all?—needs to be asked and answered endlessly. The dangers remain the same—a slutty, scheming woman knows how to work a roving, middle-aged husband’s interest when his sweet but naive wife does not. Surrounded by her friends, Mary

is misled into abandoning her husband to the scheming Crystal, only to relent and reconcile in the end. The clever trick of *The Women* is to make men as irrelevant as they are central to this dilemma. Men are at once easy to manipulate through their predictable sexual desires and the prize over which women struggle. Flesh and blood men are absent from the movie. They are solely women’s fantasies, enchanting and infuriating in equal parts.

The absence of men points to the lesson at the core of *The Women*. A smart, modern woman is in charge and that means fighting for her marriage but not overreacting to her husband’s

dalliances. The 1939 version is quite explicit that such selflessness is the very mark of emancipation. Keeping a marriage going in the face of the weaknesses in men's nature requires all the political skills that a modern woman can muster. The movie presents this combination of romance and realism as Mary's modernness and as a corrective to the excesses of feminism's first wave. For as the movie's lone unmarried career gal says of her spinster self, "nature abhors an old maid with frozen assets."

What has changed? The route for Mary back to marriage takes a long detour—through personal discovery. Mary must "find herself" before she dare return to her marriage. Finding herself means finding a career that isn't so much about money (which is curiously missing from any one's consideration) but about self-discovery. In the blink of an eye, Mary is the head of a bustling production and design company with a staff of thirty women. Repairing the marriage is still the ostensible goal, but it seems to have receded into the background. Mary will get her husband back—when she has the time. The memorable final scene in the 1939 version has Mary running open armed toward the husband just on the other side of the camera. In 2008, she's on a cell phone, squeezing a dinner with him into her crowded agenda. Selfishness, not selflessness, is what makes a modern marriage work.

Despite its superficial hard-headedness in contrast to the 1939 version, *The Women* of 2008 is at its core less clear-eyed. *The Women* in 1939 know that choices must be made, and an undercurrent of the movie refuses to celebrate the compromises that Mary learns to make. Perhaps it has something to do with how much less compelling Meg Ryan is in the lead role, but in 2008, the lesson offered ("find yourself") is put forward as a successful solution to the modern woman's dilemma, not a necessary concession to an irresolvable contradiction. There are no misgivings. Can we have it all? While the original says no and insists that a smart modern woman needs to understand this; in 2008, the answer is an unqualified yes.

Into the emotional void that this attenuated and slightly hysterical devotion to marriage for the modern woman opens up, comes an entirely new and distinctive element in the 2008 version, straight from the just preceding *Sex and the City*, another Hollywood feminist movie. Ryan, Benning, Pinkett Smith, and Messing look for all the world like Charlotte, Carrie, Samantha, and Miranda strutting the streets of New York. In 1939, women are the real evil-doers in Mary's life, especially the devious Sylvia. The movie looks at the claims of sisterhood with a withering eye.

In 2008, the saving power of friendships among women is the ultimate romance. Annette

Benning's Sylvia undergoes as much of a transformation as does Ryan's Mary, as she regrets and atones for her disloyalty to her friend. Indeed, Sylvia becomes the most compelling character of the movie, no longer a plot device, foil for the heroine, or comic relief. In 1939, Mary's mother warns her not to count on her girlfriends. In 2008, Mary's mother has nothing to offer except the mistakes of her own devotion to marriage. In 2008, girlfriends are all a girl has. Even more than in 1939, men are emotionally as well as cinematically absent. As *The Women* of 2008 draws to its resolution, Mary is weeping for her emotional loss. "Stephen?" someone asks. "No," says Mary, "Sylvia."

Ellen C. DuBois is a Professor in the Department of History at UCLA. She's the co-author with Lynn Dumenil of *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (St. Martin's, 2005). A version of this essay appeared earlier in *Dissent* (<http://www.dissentmagazine.org>). Images from the 2008 movie of *The Women* are copyrighted 2008 by Picturehouse. Images from the 1939 version are copyrighted 2002 by Warner Brothers.

young migrants. Black people who were unfamiliar with urban life and the competition needed to survive it often found themselves in trouble.

To talk about racial progress in the early twentieth century is to talk about the natures of black women, particularly their criminal natures and sexual proclivities. During the Great Migration, their proper presence in the cities was of utmost importance to both racist social critics and progressive racial uplift campaigns. In 1904, Eleanor Tayleur described the downward spiral black women had succumbed to following the end of slavery. Because black women no longer benefited from the paternalistic slavery system, particularly the proximity to the piety and purity of white women, they were reverting to their savage state. According to Tayleur, “In the peculiar code of ethics that governs the negro woman any way of obtaining a livelihood is more honorable than respect-

able than working for it” (268). The decadence that Tayleur observes, was most prominent in black women’s new urban homes: “In the cities the majority of negro women have no homes, but a room which they oftener than not share with strangers. The beds are unmade, the dishes unwashed, the floor unswept. Here children are born to be thrust out into the street as soon as possible” (267). In addition to not being maternal (an old stereotype from the days of slavery), the urban black woman was dirty, and her living conditions, though not directly stated here, led her to be sexually indiscriminate. She lives in a filthy room with strange men and unmade beds, and it’s not a place for children. Hypersexuality was also a long-held stereotype about black women, but the urban setting exacerbated it and transformed the figure of the fertile black woman from a tool which increased slaveholders’ wealth into a social burden,

an early depiction of the welfare queen. In these formations, the woman and the home reflect one another in their filthiness, unfitness for children, and scandalous reputation.

As a response to ideas such as Tayleur’s, black benevolent societies felt that policing black women more closely was the solution. They “establishe[d] a direct relationship between the social supervision of black women migrants and the control of their moral and sexual behavior, between the morally unacceptable economics of sex for sale and a morally acceptable policing of black female sexuality” (Carby 24). What we see is that instead of the houses described in the earlier texts reflecting black women, the depictions of Harlem itself mirrored those of its black female inhabitants. Like black women, Harlem has the capacity to be respectable and invested in uplift. What’s more, it can be the site of racial re-invention. In this space, away

from the baggage and racial violence of the South, black Americans can learn a new way of interacting with one another and with their environment.

However, let’s not applaud this new doctrine just yet because these organizations suggested black women, and again Harlem itself, hid a penchant for opportunistic wrongdoing that could take over if left unchecked. We see this sentiment repeatedly in the writings of social activists and benevolence campaigners. In 1905, *The Colored American Magazine* printed an essay by Frances Kellor, warning of the dangers that could come to black women in Northern cities, imploring young women not to “depend upon the word and promises of young Negro men who may have been honest and true when living in the South. Many of them who have been industrious there go astray in Northern cities” (697). Young black women who came to the

North to reunite with husbands and boyfriends were warned that these men often lived off of the earnings of women and that to become involved with them would mean economic disaster. These women were also warned not to be misled by the promise of easy employment because the arrangements were often exploitative. Young women were often told that they would have jobs in offices, but when they arrived in New York, they were forced to live in squalid conditions and to work as domestics. Those who did not want to be cheated were particularly vulnerable because employment agents charged exorbitant fees and would threaten the girls' Southern families if they did not cooperate. Desperate for money and freedom, these women were most likely to be led astray by "strange men who make attractive proposals" and into what reformer Victoria Earle Matthews would later call "moral death" (Kellor 377). In 1898, Matthews

warned that "so successful have been the operations of certain associations for the bringing of young innocent girls from the South for immoral purposes, that all southern girls are commonly adjudged to be weak morally...Many of the dangers confronting our girls from the South in the great cities of the North are so perfectly planned, so overwhelming in their power to subjugate and destroy that no women's daughter is safe away from home" (381-2).

The answer to these challenges was the founding of benevolent societies that would not only help migrants in the North, but also spread their message to women still in the South. In 1905, Frances Kellor, in an article entitled "Southern Colored Girls at the North: The Problem of Their Protection," advocated for a network of social agencies for female migrants. These agencies would first provide scores of women who would meet and befriend young migrant women

at the train station, much like the services offered to immigrant women at Ellis Island. These "helping hands" would then direct new migrants to safe and affordable housing because the need to pay Harlem rents would almost ensure women's immoral behavior. Finally, a training school connected with the boarding house would help women learn skills that would prepare them for clerical jobs. Above all, black female missionaries who felt it their duty to help new migrants navigate the city would administer all these services.

Though this discourse of benevolence places some of the blame on unscrupulous employers and a well-connected network of people set out to lead black women astray, the authors still place the ultimate responsibility in the hands of the black woman. In addition to navigating a new environment in which sexuality and gender relations played out in a setting of black

male unemployment and desertion, black women also had the added pressure of symbolizing the new racial future for black Americans. If they were industrious and hard-working, they would reflect well on the race. If they failed, however, particularly in moral and sexual matters, the entire race fails. Matthews writes that "the public, seeing these women haunting certain portions of the city in such an unfailing stream, takes it for granted that all black people—all Afro-Americans are naturally low" (385).³

If Harlem can mean multiple things simultaneously, so can the depictions of Harlem's women. In A. Robert Lee's quote at the beginning of this piece, a distinction is made between those who are involved in organized crime and those who fall into crime due to the pressures of urban living, just as the social reformers made distinctions between black women who could still be saved and those who

were just lost to the streets. The city, then, represents a hostile place for women, particularly those seeking to function independent of a man. It symbolizes the racist and patriarchal forces summoned to keep her in her “proper place” and encloses her and her image in a cage of sexual and gendered stereotypes.

Courtney Marshall is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at UCLA with a concentration in Women's Studies. Her dissertation, entitled “Law, Literature, and the Black Female Subject” traces the theoretical connections between critical race studies and Black feminist literary criticism. Her related interests include queer theory and critical prison studies. She was awarded the CSW Paula Stone Dissertation Research Fellowship in June of 2008.

CREDIT: The image of *The Sport of the Gods* film poster comes from the US Postal

Service, which just released the “Black Cinema” postage stamp set, featuring film posters from the 1920s to 1950s.

NOTES

1. See Fred Moten, “Criminality and Uplift,” *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W. E. B. Du Bois*, Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum, editors, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
2. See Carol Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Race Media, and Crime Reporting*, Routledge, 2006.
3. In the previous sentence, Matthews writes, “So our ‘tenderloins’ are filled.” According to my research, this term refers to a red light district, and the term was allegedly coined by Police Captain Alexander Williams in the late 1870s. So though the tenderloin refers to an area south of Harlem and not the setting of *The Street*, I think it is important for illustrating the almost hysterical focus on black women’s sexuality that the novel references.

STATE OF THE UNION

A Conference on Marriage and Politics

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2008 • 8:30 AM to 5 PM • ROYCE 314

8:30 to 9 am

WELCOME BY *Kathleen McHugh*
OPENING REMARKS BY *Juliet Williams*

9 to 10:30 am

SESSION 1

LAWS OF LOVE

Paul Apostolidis, Susan Koshy, Rachel Moran

10:30 to 10:45 am

BREAK

10:45 am to 12:15 pm

SESSION 2

THINKING THROUGH SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Tom Boellstorff, Mignon Moore, Nancy Polikoff

12:15 to 2 pm

LUNCH

2 to 3:30 pm

SESSION 3

INTIMACY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Anna Marie Smith, Judith Stacey

3:30 to 4 pm

CLOSING REMARKS

4 to 5 pm

RECEPTION

Cosponsored by the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, UCLA Department of Anthropology, UCLA Department of Political Science, UCLA Department of Sociology, UCLA Department of Women’s Studies, the Williams Institute of the UCLA School of Law, and the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families

For more information, visit www.csw.ucla.edu

Kaleidoscopes on the Coffee Table

CATHERINE LORD AND RICHARD MEYER'S *ART IN QUEER CULTURE: 1885–PRESENT*

by Vivian Davis

FOR MANY STUDENTS, HISTORY BOOKS CAN BE STOLID AFFAIRS. Dusty tomes, filled with names and dates best suited for rote memorization. Only occasionally is there color. Rarely a stray joke. Even art history books, a discipline that offers readers the anodyne of full-page pictures, can be a bit predictable. Republished volumes such as Helen Gardner's *Art through the Ages* (1926) or E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1950) retain their popularity because they rehearse, rather than contest, the familiar chronological narratives. Gardner's book, now in its twelfth edition, offers readers a review of the art world from the Paleolithic era to the twentieth century, from the Venus of Willendorf to Warhol's "Marilyn Diptych." Similarly, Gombrich's *The Story of Art* leads a breakneck tour through cave painting, Leonardo's "Mona Lisa," and the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Though daunting in size (Gardner's *Art through the Ages* clocks in at just under 1200 pages), such books offer little in the way of surprises. Their survey approach reinforces a recognizable canon of luminaries, faces not unfamiliar to gallery walls and glassy-eyed tourists, and constructs compact versions of history that are, for the most part, neatly linear. Timelines and tidbits are both plentiful. Peddling the promise that art history is somehow fully



Amy E. Conger, from *Reversing Vandalism*, "Queer Reader Mandorla," 2004

David McDermott
and Peter McGough,
“A Friend of Dorothy,”
1943,” 1986



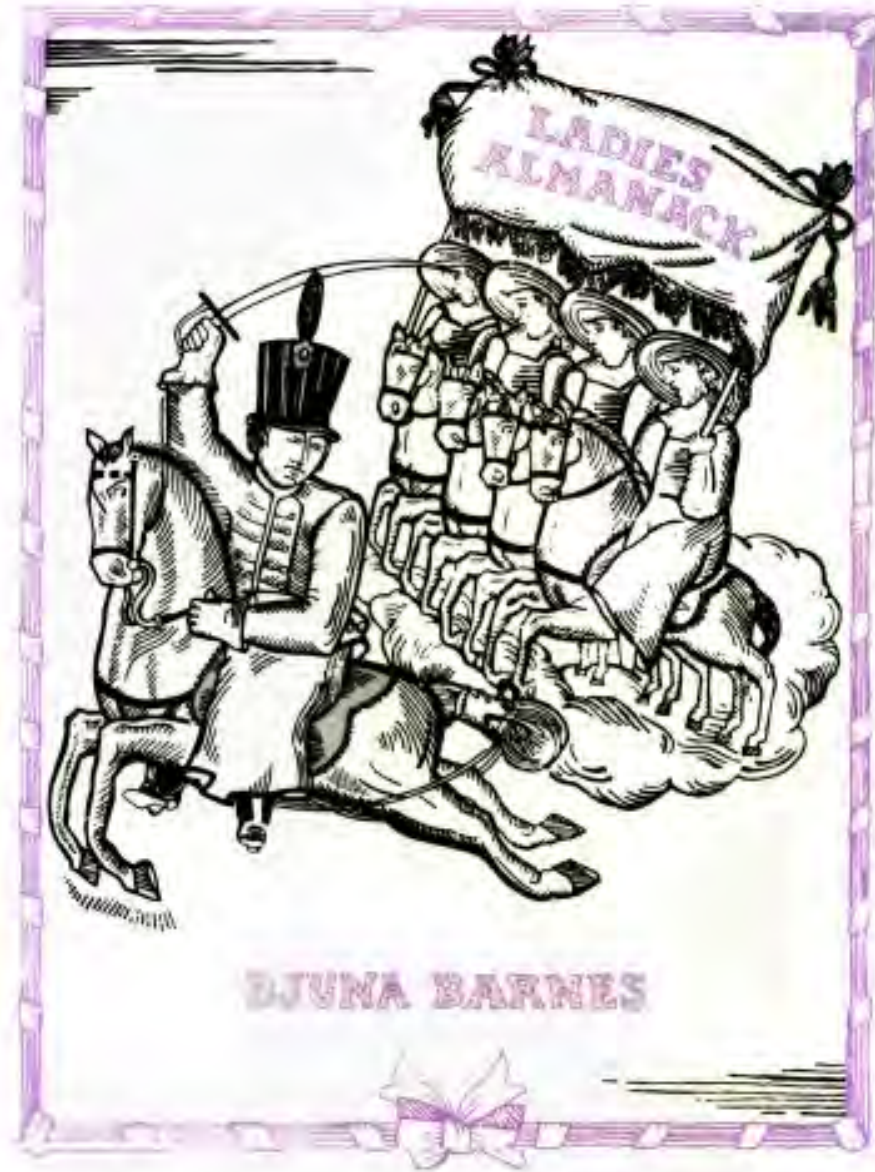
knowable and, moreover, comprehensible, these titles quickly find their way into undergraduate classrooms and onto coffee tables.

An upcoming volume from Phaidon, however, looks to clear off said coffee tables. Or at least, reshuffle them. Edited by Catherine Lord, Department of Studio Art, UCI, and Richard Meyer, Department of Art History, USC, *Art in Queer Culture: 1885 – Present* pieces together a patch of visual landscape (including sketches, paintings, illustrations, photography, print documents, and ephemera) in order to think through the complex relationships between art, queerness, and culture from the late nineteenth century to the present. During Friday’s plenary panel of the 2008 Los Angeles Queer Studies Conference, Professors Lord and Meyer outlined the general aims of their project, discussing the ways in which writing queer culture into the history of art means rethinking categories of “Art” and “History” more broadly. Referring to the book as a “collage of footnotes,” Lord explained that *Art in Queer Culture* will work in several ways to resist traditional art historical approaches and hierarchical thinking. For example, the collection is set to feature only one piece from each of the selected artists, no matter how supposedly

significant. Leveling the playing field in terms of structure and included materials reshapes the lines between high and low culture, center and margin, “Art” and detritus. The proposed volume therefore raises questions while answering them, as straight canonical narratives are set into the shifting motion of a kaleidoscope.

The lively collaboration between Lord and Meyer appears to be the engine of this critical conversation. Lord, an artist, and Meyer, an art historian, each bring valuable, though varying perspectives to the table. These differences, as the two demonstrated during the session, are productive of a rich dialogue, one comprised of questions and asides, rather than adherence to a strict script. During the session, the pair provided a brief preview of the different kinds of material they would be incorporating into their book. Lord led the audience through a slide show of the art and intimacies of “scribblers” such as Djuna Barnes, Janet Flanner, and Bertha Harris. Her presentation thoughtfully considered the public/private correspondences between these women, with highlights including reflections on Barnes’ *The Ladies Almanack* (1928) - “a zine before there were zines” Lord quipped. Meyers, likewise, looked at a wide variety of images, such

**Djuna Barnes,
Ladies Almanack,
1928**



as a series put together by activist/artist collective Gran Fury and McDermott and McGough's provocative "A Friend of Dorothy, 1943" (1986). Most striking, however, was his discussion of a recent exhibition, entitled "Reversing Vandalism," organized by the San Francisco Public Library, a showcase of slashed public library books transformed, by a number of artists, into pieces of art. Because the books were defaced for their subject matter (usually depictions of same-sex desire, sometimes the simple inclusion of the word "gay" in the title or author's name), the refashioning of the damaged property provided artists with an opportunity to recontextualize and reclaim. As Meyer suggested, the exhibition took what was once stigmatized and forced it into another register, an insight that brought to light the work of Lord and Meyer's project more generally. With its recycling, reversing, and remaking, theirs is a book that holds up similar transformative possibilities.

Though originally proposed as a museum exhibition (it was, according to Lord, promptly rejected), *Art in Queer Culture: 1885-Present* is forthcoming from Phaidon, an international publisher of books on art, photography, and

architecture whose titles include, among others, Gombrich's influential and ubiquitous *The Story of Art*. When asked by an audience member what the consequences were of moving beyond the academic press into the mainstream, Meyer remained staunchly optimistic. He pointed to the benefits of placing the book within a global market, seeing opportunity in its widespread distribution. "I could have used this book in graduate school," he told the questioner, "even undergraduate." By making use of Phaidon's resources, however, Lord and Meyer will be able to see their volume placed not only on library shelves and classrooms, but on coffee tables as well. The potential to appeal to readers outside of academia or queer subcultures is one of the most important points about the ambitious scope of the project. In some ways, it is at the very heart of the challenges to art, history, and canon the project presents. As Lord later joked with the audience, the session drawing to a close, "Think of the coffee table, not the book."

Vivian Davis is a doctoral student in the Department of English at UCLA and a writer for *CSW Update*.

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Travel Grant Recipient Robert Summers Researches Zines by Vaginal Davis



Robert Summers, a PhD candidate in the Department of Art History at UCLA, was awarded a CSW travel grant this year. His essay titled "Vaginal Davis

Does Art history" was recently published in the anthology *Dead History, Live Art* (Liverpool University Press, 2008). His dissertation, titled "Enacting a Queer Aesthetic Existence: The Art/Life of Vaginal Davis," from which the published essay comes, is built around the L.A.- and, now, Berlin-based conceptual, literary, video, and performance artist Vaginal Davis. As Dominic Johnson of Freize Magazine (see www.vaginaldavis.com), noted, "Vaginal Davis is an originator of the homo-core punk movement and a gender-queer art-music icon. Her concept bands—including Pedro Muriel and Esther, Cholita! The Female Menudo, black fag, and the Afro Sisters—have left an indelible mark

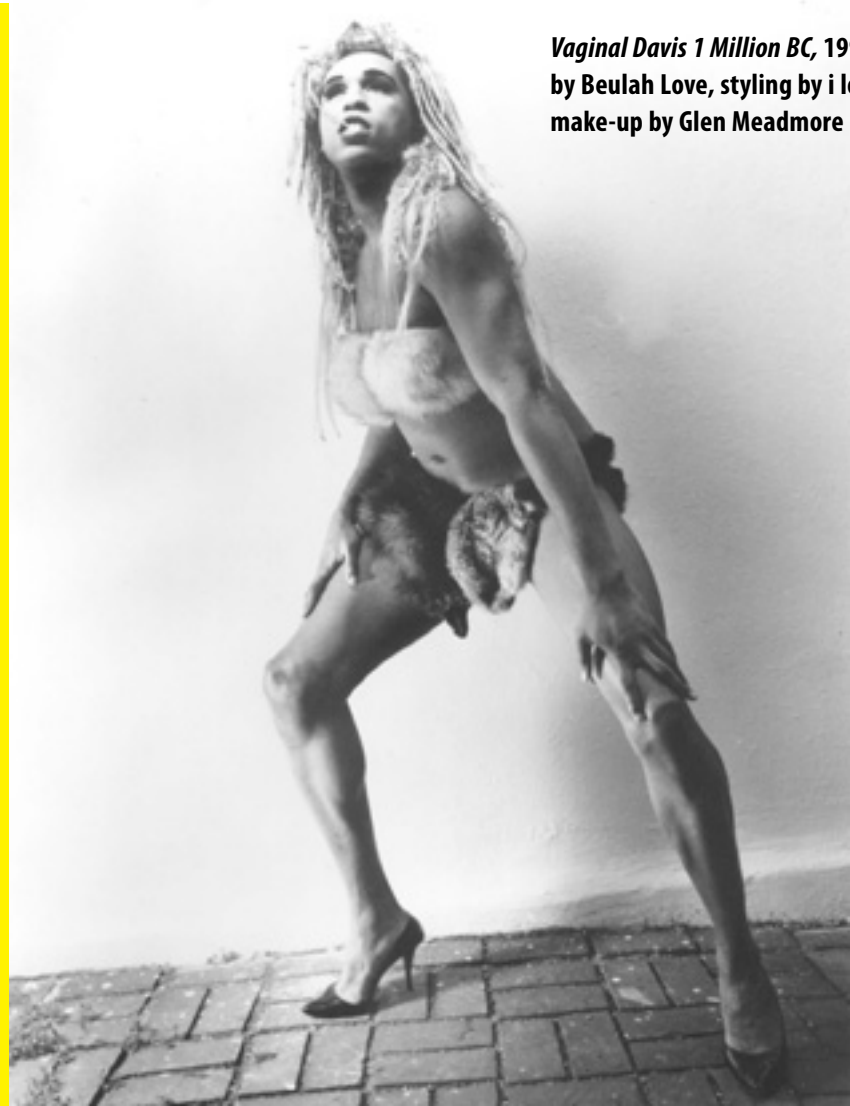
on the development of underground music. Like Ron Athey, Ms Davis made her name in LA's club performance scene, and has earned herself a similar notoriety as a cultural antagonist and erotic provocateur." In Summers's view, Davis has practiced, for over 30 years, a "queer-feminist politics of aesthetics" that surfaces the racial, gender, class, and sexual tensions and discriminations within certain lesbian and gay communities and heteronormative culture by performing her transgender African-Mexican-American body/self within clubs and alternative spaces—not to mention in public, on the streets. As opposed to a traditional art-historical monograph that strictly focuses on the "fine art" and life of an individual artist, Summers's dissertation simultaneously gives worth and weight to ephemera and the intersections made between Davis and other queer and feminist artists working antagonistically within the social-sphere.



Currently, Summers is researching Vaginal Davis's "zines." These ephemeral, non-commercial, handmade, and self-distributed "underground" publications, before the Internet, were one of the few ways queers across various locations could meet others, find out what was happening outside of (white, middle-class) lesbian and gay and heterosexual politics, clubs, and art and music scenes, and support one another. Summers argues that by the creation and deployment of Davis's zines, she unwittingly

(or wittingly) commenced a “queer archive” of queer modes of existence, which needs to be researched and brought into “our” present conservative and reactionary climate in order to learn from it.

With the generous grant from the CSW, Summers will be able to complete his work on this under-researched topic, which is crucial to understanding an aspect of queer culture, creativity, and politics. Indeed, it is imperative to continue to research Vaginal Davis’s zines at various institutions in order to complete the first monograph on Davis and, at the same time, work on a radically democratic and aesthetic moment within queer culture, from which we can learn much today, and which, Summers argues, we must learn from for the future(s) of queer theories, queer studies, and queer lives.



Vaginal Davis 1 Million BC, 1992 photo by Beulah Love, styling by i love Ricky, make-up by Glen Meadmore

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