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SWITCHPOINTS

A REVIEW OF KATHRYN STOCKTON'S "OEDIPUS RACED, OR THE CHILD QUEERED BY COLOR"

by Robert Summers

This past December, as part of CSW's *Color of LGBT: Race in Sexuality* faculty curator series, Kathryn Bond Stockton gave a provocative and rich presentation titled "Oedipus Raced, or the Child Queered by Color." The talk bridged her earlier work in *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* (Duke University Press, 2006)—with its focus on adult shame and debasement¹—with her new work on the "queer child" in twentieth-century literature and visual culture, where this

1. Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (Duke University Press, 2006), 2; all subsequent references will be in parentheses. Stockton's work on the "queer child" appears in *Curiouser* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

particular child is found, given she is erased from history, proper. Stockton's presentation began by foregrounding one of the theoretical ideas crucial to her work: "switchpoints"—defined as "a point of connection between two signs... where something from one flows toward the other, *lending its connotative spread and signifying force to the other* ... sometimes shifting it or adulterating it" (5). The switchpoint of Stockton's talk was not only where "Black" and "Queer" meet but also where "the ghostly gay child *lends meaning to the child queered by color*—who in some cases may also be gay."² Furthermore, she theorized what has been under-theorized in queer studies: the "gay" or "queer" child, which

2. All quotes are from Stockton's presentation, <http://www.csw.ucla.edu/videocasts/KS.mov>—emphasis mine.



"Oedipus Raced, or the Child Queered by Color: "Gay" Child and "Black" Child in Liberal Race Films," a talk by Kathryn Stockton, on December 3, 2008, was part of the CSW "Race in Sexuality: The Color of LGBT" series, which was curated by Joseph Bristow, a professor in the Department of English at UCLA.



Kathryn Bond Stockton is Professor of English and Director of Gender Studies at the University of Utah. Her most recent book, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer"* was a national finalist for the Lambda Literary Award, and last year she received the Crompton-Noll Prize, awarded by the Modern Language Association, for the best essay in gay and lesbian studies. She has also authored *God between Their Lips: Desire between Women in Irigaray, Bronte, and Eliot* (Stanford University Press, 1994), and her new book on the queer child is forthcoming from Duke University Press, Series Q.

dovetails with another highly original theoretical idea that Stockton explored, “the gay child’s backward birth”—which comes from a “queer theorization” of the “ghosts in the nursery” in psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, Stockton’s presentation was not only multilayered but also highly interdisciplinary.

Interestingly, this presentation on the “queer child” and/as the “child queer by color” was given after the election of Barack Obama, the first black presidential candidate—and now President—as well as the passage of proposition 8 in California and similar anti-gay marriage propositions in Arizona and Florida. The main argument deployed by supporters of proposition 8 was the need to “protect the children” and “their innocence” from learning about—if not turning toward—“homosexuality.”³ This type of “protection of children” or “the Child,” as Lee Edelman has pointed out in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, is a fight for the traditional family and its corollary: “reproductive futurism.”⁴ It should come as no surprise that

3. See the pro-Proposition 8 website, <http://www.protectmarriage.com>, with its white, middle-class heterosexual couples with children and its banner, “Restoring Marriage & Protecting California Children,” in which “restoring” refers to the California’s Supreme Court ruling reversing Proposition 22 and allowing same-sex marriage.

4. Edelman, *No Future* (Duke University Press, 2004).

children and “the Child” are always white, given this color has historically connoted “innocence” and “purity.” This is but one issue that Stockton brought to the fore in her presentation—which can be understood as a response to and extension of Edelman’s text—namely, to think of “the Child” differently and to think theoretically of the “proto-gay child,” the child who may always already be “queer.” Further, she explores the switchpoint—one not connected by Edelman—that sexuality *and* race with regard to the child meet up in peculiar ways. Instead of focusing solely on Edelman’s notion of “the Child,” Stockton zeroes in on the “queer child” who illuminates “the problem of the child in general.” Furthermore, she argues that the “queer child” always “haunts” the child as she is “known” by normative society. Moreover, the child as “queer” might very well be just beneath the surface of any child: “If you scratch a child you are going to find a ‘queer’—if not ‘gay’—then just plain strange.”

In her talk, which deployed literature and visual culture, Stockton argued that there is always something temporally and spatially “odd” about the queer or proto-gay child—because “she only ever appears *after* retrospection and *after* a death.” This is because the queer child has not been able to announce itself as “gay” or “homosexual”—categories applicable only to adults, given they are understood as sexual beings, which ostensibly isn’t the case for

children. But as “we” all know, all children—even the “peculiar” ones—are always already assumed to be heterosexual—which still, ironically, announces children as sexual: the (il)logic of normative-heterosexuality.

It should be noted that Stockton, via her presentation, is not arguing for some “sentimental understanding of the child” or for “gay children rights,” but rather she interrogates the switchpoints between race and queerness in order to think through the ways in which the “queer child” is born in reverse and what this does to conceptions of childhood. As Stockton puts it, the question is often asked, “When did you know you were gay?” and/or “Were you gay as a child?” These questions ask the “gay” or “queer” adult to account for this “past child”—a child that no longer exists. Is there a “gay child”? Yes and no. The gay child only ever comes about after the “death of the straight child”: the “tombstone is the birthplace of the gay child.” *Indeed, a specter haunts the child and childhood.*

Race entered the presentation more explicitly when Stockton read William Blake’s “The Little Black Boy” (1789), a poem in which we learn that color encodes innocence as white and childlike and black as strength and experience. The “little black child,” therefore, can never be a proper child, only ever a “queer” one: “the child queered by color.” Indeed, the child is “queered by color” in that he is unable to be a child within normative society, which is to say a heterosexual

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and racist one. This is true today, even after the victory of Obama. The (painfully ironic) passage of Proposition 8, in which, according to Judith Butler, from the election “the emergence of the counter Bradley-effect [took place], when voters could and did explicitly own up to their own racism, but said they would vote for Obama anyway,” and, in some states they could proclaim hetero-normativity, we had the passage of anti-gay marriage propositions to demonstrate the reign of a racist and normative-heterosexuality at work.⁵ The exploration of race and sexuality are more pressing than ever.

5. Butler discusses the contradictions at play in the recent election of the first black president while preserving other “traditional” ideals in the U.S.; see “Uncritical Exuberance,” <http://www.indybay.org>

Stockton also discussed race and the “queer child” in films such as *Guess Whose Coming to Dinner* (1967), the contemporary remake-as-reversal of *Guess Who* (2005), and the explicitly “queer” and racial play-cum-film *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), in which Paul (Will Smith) is a “queer” kind of guest and kid, in which he disrupts the normative: inhabits it and undoes it.

Throughout, Stockton asks us to follow switchpoints and think of how the “queer child” and/or the “child queered by color” disrupts our notions of the child as such and can aid “us” in rethinking aspects of queer theory. Following the “queer child” and/or the “child queered by race” would serve queer studies well, and Stockton is taking us along these tracks.

Robert Summers is a PhD candidate in the Department of Art History at UCLA. 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.