

**Simon Dickel. *Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, the Protest Era, and Constructions of Black Gay Identity*. FORECAAST 20. Münster, LIT: 2011. 296 pp. €29,90.**

Simon Dickel's literary study, *Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, the Protest Era, and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980s and 90s*, is a smart investigation into the agendas, strategies, and complications of identity politics. Through extended analyses of what he posits as "the key texts constitutive of the black gay cultural activism of the 1980s and 1990s" (265), Dickel reveals the ways in which a number of writers and filmmakers have used historical references to the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Era to legitimize and validate an identity category that is at the same time black *and* gay. As black gay men in the 1980s and 90s faced double marginalization from both gay activism (which was predominantly white) and the black liberation movement (which was predominantly homophobic), the collaborative construction of a distinctive black gay cultural tradition seemed a viable strategy for political survival. Dickel, however, also points to the trouble with such a historiographical move: He argues convincingly that, in order to further their particular political objectives, artists and activists of the 1980s and 90s often actively misconstrued the more fluid and hybrid approaches to sexual and racial identity characterizing the original Harlem Renaissance and Protest Era texts. *Black/Gay*, then, emerges not only as a book about the politics of identity, but also about the politics of history.

Dickel's book opens with a discussion of four black gay anthologies published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, namely *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991), *Black Gay Voices* (1988), and *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993). This survey is clearly indicated to set the stage for the more in-depth readings of works by Steven Corbin, Isaac Julien, Randall Kenan, Melvin Dixon, and Samuel Delany that constitute the main part of the book. By way of introducing the anthologies, Dickel familiarizes the reader with the major social and political debates relating to black gay men in the 1980s and 90s and concomitantly suggests the themes that will reappear throughout the book: the possibility of black gay identity and community, the struggle against racism and homophobia on a number of fronts, the deadly consequences of the AIDS epidemic, and the prospects of interracial desire and relationships. In addition, Dickel makes clear that the particular strain of black gay writing under scrutiny in *Black/Gay* remains a historically narrow phenomenon limited to a period of no more than about ten years. The main reason for this lies, sadly, in the "devastating consequences of the AIDS crisis" (22). Moreover, Dickel argues that the forging of new alliances related to the emergence of queer activism and the continued mainstreaming of black gay topics made it difficult to trace distinctly black gay writing and activism after the mid-1990s.

After having outlined the thematic range of his study, Dickel continues to erect a theoretical framework for the scrutiny of black gay male texts. Taking his inspiration from Stuart Hall, Cornel West, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, he adopts a stance that recognizes the social and cultural constructedness of identities on the one hand and the fundamental intersectionality of various lines of difference such as race, class, gender, or sexuality on the other. This fairly general theoretical approach is complemented by recent thinking in black queer theory that focuses on "forms of resistance rooted in black vernacular traditions" (49). In this context, Dickel references José Muñoz' idea of "disidentification" (72-75) and E. Patrick Johnson's concept of "quare," which he relates to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s well-known description of "signifying" as an African American vernacular practice of indirect communication (75-81). While *Black/Gay* is very precise about concepts of identity and difference, I find it rather peculiar that history remains conspicuously undertheorized in the book. Although Dickel's

analyses are so evidently concerned with cultural memory and tradition, the appropriation of the past, and various modes of (re-)writing history, he offers no fully fleshed-out discussion of history and historicity. Instead, he only vaguely refers to his book as “taking a new historicist approach” (9) and includes just quick nods to Walter Benjamin’s much-discussed “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (126) and Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (238). Although the absence of a more comprehensive theory of history does not significantly diminish the book’s highly perceptive analytical accomplishment, *Black/Gay* seems somewhat removed from recent productive debates over historiographic practice in the humanities in general and in queer theory in particular.

These qualifications notwithstanding, the strength of Simon Dickel’s study clearly lies in his close readings of a corpus consisting of six representative black gay texts. The extended analyses that make up the larger part of *Black/Gay* unfold in two parts: While the first three texts, Steven Corbin’s *No Easy Place to Be* (1989), Isaac Julien’s film *Looking for Langston* (1989), and Samuel R. Delany’s “Atlantis: Model 1924” (1995), are concerned with a rewriting of the Harlem Renaissance, the second part focuses on the Protest and Civil Rights Era. In particular, Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), Melvin Dixon’s *Vanishing Rooms* (1991) and Samuel R. Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988) are linked by their interest in reconstructing James Baldwin’s life and work.

Dickel is careful to acknowledge each text in its own right; he carves out different “degree[s] of openness regarding the identity category ‘black gay man’” (266), reveals diverse ways of telling history, yet also points to aesthetic and political strategies common to all texts. In the chapter “Looking for the Harlem Renaissance,” for instance, he shows how the simple didacticism of Steven Corbin’s *No Easy Place to Be* and the celebrated avant-gardism of Isaac Julien’s experimental film *Looking for Langston* both build on the misappropriation of an influential Harlem Renaissance text, namely Richard Bruce Nugent’s short story “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.” While Nugent’s story is a stream-of-consciousness narrative about interracial love, bisexuality and polyamory, both Julien’s and Corbin’s adaptations erase much of the racial and sexual ambiguity of the original, and cling to a rather fixed and exclusive notion of black gay identity and desire. This blatant erasure is especially remarkable in the otherwise highly ambivalent *Looking for Langston*, which features voice-over excerpts from “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.” In a marvelous close reading, Dickel shows that in one such passage, the word “white” is simply omitted, literally erased from the spoken text. In order to fit into the 1980s and 90s identity politics project of black gay emancipation, thus, a complex narrative about interracial desire is silently turned into a more straightforward tale of two black gay men loving each other.

In the chapter “Looking for Baldwin and the Protest Era,” Dickel argues that “many black gay writers in the 1980s invented a Baldwin much more unambiguous than can be deduced from his writings and interviews” (172). Indeed, James Baldwin, most famous probably for his 1953 autobiographical novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, was “very skeptical about the concept of gay identity, and he repeatedly distanced himself from the gay sub-culture by criticising drag queens and sissies in both his fiction and essays” (173). Fashioning Baldwin as a historical reference point for the construction of a black gay identity, then, necessitates a major historical revision. Dickel’s ensuing analysis of Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* and Melvin Dixon’s *Vanishing Rooms* elucidates the ways in which both texts “signify” on Baldwin’s 1956 novel *Giovanni’s Room*, a tragic tale about same-sex desire set in a Parisian white gay male subculture. Through these readings, Dickel carefully parses the issues of racial shame, gay masculinism, white racism, and the intersections of race and homosexuality that

inform the texts' complex reworking of James Baldwin's personal history in the context of Civil Rights activism and black (heterosexual) empowerment.

In both parts of his analysis, Simon Dickel singles out Samuel R. Delany's texts as singularly complicated ruminations on the problematic of a distinctly black gay identity. "Against the background of the other texts analyzed in my study," Dickel claims, "both of Delany's texts are exceptional" (272). For Delany, the revolutionary act of the 1980s does not only involve, as in Joseph Beam's famous line, "black men loving black men" (32), but much more importantly, the overcoming of racial, sexual and class boundaries altogether. Samuel Delany, Dickel argues, is "skeptical of all forms of essentialism and humorously comments on the way black gay identity is constructed in texts by some black gay writers of the 1980s" (262). Highly self-reflexive and deeply critical of origins and cultural roots, Delany's focus lies on the multifarious possibilities and the many routes opened up by interracial and interclass contact. Accordingly, Delany's take on the Harlem Renaissance, "Atlantis: Model 1924," is an ambiguous and ironic historiographic metafiction involving an implicitly sexual conversation near Brooklyn Bridge between the naive black Sam (who is modeled on Delany's own father) and the sophisticated white poet Harold Hart (who is modeled on the modernist writer Hart Crane). Likewise, Delany's encounter with James Baldwin in his memoir *The Motion of Light in Water* amounts to a short and anticlimactic "non-conversation" (261) on the telephone in which the two writers have almost nothing to say to one another.

In a way, I would argue, *Black/Gay* is written in the spirit of Samuel Delany's work. Dickel points his readers to the inevitable cultural constructedness of identities along various intersecting lines of difference; he highlights the porousness and hybridity of seemingly fixed categories, and emphasizes the major reconstruction work needed to arrive at smooth historical narratives. In this highly recommendable book, Simon Dickel calls attention to the contradictions, paradoxes, and inconsistencies of narrowly conceived identity politics, and at the same time deeply honors the vibrant and brave cultural production of black gay artists.

Leopold Lippert, University of Vienna, September 2011.