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Susan Stryker and Kara Keeling: Considering "Trans-" and "Queer" at the Plenary Session of UCLA Queer Studies Conference 2010

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Susan Stryker and Kara Keeling

PANEL REVIEW BY HEATHER COLLETTE-VANDERAA

TWO LEADING SCHOLARS in transgender and queer studies, Susan Stryker, Associate Professor in the Gender Studies Program at Indiana University, Bloomington, and Kara Keeling, Associate Professor in the Critical Studies Program of USC's School of Cinematic Arts, were the featured speakers in the plenary session of this year's UCLA Queer Studies Conference. Organized by the UCLA Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Program, the annual conference showcases a rich variety of queer research and provides a chance for students, faculty, and independent researchers to share work and insights. Stryker and Keeling were

critical of existing paradigms or ontologies but were also optimistic, engaging with the liminal spaces of queer-and trans-potentialities, situated within a broader context of current political and social discourses concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities.

IT DON'T WORRY ME?

Susan Stryker is an internationally recognized Emmy Award-winning filmmaker and independent scholar whose theoretical writing and empirical research have helped shape the field of transgender studies. She earned a Ph.D. in United States History from the University of California at Berkeley in 1992, and later held a

post-doctoral fellowship in sexuality studies at Stanford University. Her projects include *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Chronicle Books, 1996), *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* (2001), the special issue on transgender studies in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (1998) and the documentary film *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (Victor Silverma and Susan Stryker, 2005)

Her plenary presentation, entitled, “(You Might Say that I’m Not Free But) It Don’t Worry Me: Transgender Theory Covers Queer Affect, Punk Rock, and Alternative Country Music,” seeks to problematize

categorical systems that delimit identity formation and political action. She noted that since the 1990s, queer and transgender studies academic and popular culture relationships to each other can be contentious—frequently troubled by the same tired binary structures of gender and sex in hierarchies of privilege. As such, Stryker is invested in the alliances between affective states of queerness, trans-ness, and music, which (in)form political and social unions while also mobilizing cross-identifications that can potentially destabilize fixed states of being. Stryker asserts that much in the way cover songs rework and transform musical iterations to produce new affective and literalized meanings, the term “queer” needs—in our historical moment—to be reworked and reshaped to remain relevant. In her words, “in order for queer to be politically effective, it needs to have a lot of trans in it.” The cover song poses, Stryker argues, a unique model to understand “the concept of covering” moments from the past in re-iterations that generate “a difference that matters.”

In research that seeks to mingle transgender theory with alternative country musical styles and queer affect with punk rock, Stryker began with an examination of the social dynamics co-constituted among diverse groups performing the song “It Don’t Worry Me” in the closing scene from Robert Altman’s 1975 film *Nashville*. To illustrate her point, Stryker showed a brief

clip of the performance of “It Don’t Worry Me” as an anthem and aural through-line evoking cross-over of “counterculture hippie sensibility” with that of white and black working-class Southerners. The song in this case operates as “a prototypical expression of alternative country music,” bringing together diverse groups of people who together form an alliance in the shared performance of “unfreedom.” The lyrics, “you may say that I’m not free/but it don’t worry me” register notions of “unfreedom” in a sociopolitical context that resonates and reverberates shared notions of oppression across gender, race, and class differences. Stryker argues, most convincingly, that “music offers opportunity to affectively rework the many social divisions” between apparently disparate communities.

“Music encourages identification with others” through affective states it produces, and in this case can also encourage linkages between historical eras. Stryker notes the link between the political and economic situations in the 1970s—an era marked by fiscal crisis and a recession, with the musical modes of country music and punk rock—and our current recession and right-wing populist movements, notably the Tea Party. Punk rock was in many ways fueled by a desire to respond to the neoliberalism in the 1970s but carries with it, Stryker argues, notions of fixity that trouble the relationship between “queer valorization of punk” and the respective sociopoliti-

cal aims. “Whereas queer and punk share what could be called an ‘aggressive passivity’ in which aggression is predicated on the acceptance of the prior condition that enables and motivates it,” she argues, “transexuality can be characterized as ‘active receptivity’ whose predicate is not a fixed position at all but rather a dynamic flux within which identificatory structures of self and other, difference and sameness can be reformed and respatialized.” Positing alternative country music as a model that can be “covered” to address right-wing reactionary politics in a more fluid, dynamic, and affective engagement, Stryker demonstrates the potential to mobilize a flexible, rather than fixed, resistance. Stryker is careful to note, “I’m not saying one (queer or trans) is better than the other, just that they do different kinds of work” to mobilize trans-identification with others.

STAR SHINE AND CLAY

Keeling’s research focuses on Third Cinema and feminist film, representations of race, sexuality, and gender in cinema, critical theory, cultural studies, and African cinema. Her book, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007), explores the role of cinematic images in the construction and maintenance of hegemonic conceptions of the world and interrogates the complex

relationships between cinematic visibility, minority politics, and the labor required to create and maintain alternative organizations of social life.

Addressing the recent queer youth suicides in her opening remarks, Keeling noted that “they are a severe and painful indictment of our society and perhaps most chillingly of our inability so far to bring into widespread existence a world in which queer youth are valued and can express themselves in their marvelous variety.” In her presentation titled “Between Star Shine and Clay: Transduction and Queer Politics,” she went on to consider the “radical refusal” of entrenched social orders, of which youth suicides in particular mark as dysfunctional systems of gender, sexuality, racial, and class oppression. Keeling thus seeks to address politics of queer youth and queer and non-queer adults through notions of translation, transcoding, transduction, and transliberation. By signifying movement and crossing over, “trans-” activates queer landscapes of identity formation as collaborative processes of mutual becoming and “world making.” “Queer theory, queer studies and queer activism,” she argues, “are at their best when they are forms of and enable queer world-making.” It is in the formation of a sustainable material and existential environment that fosters rather than represses open, diverse, fluid, and flexible queer expression with which the notions of transduction and

transliberation offer up to queer politics, to trans-radicalize queer states of becoming rather than static reiterations of normative states of being. A bridge, then, seems an apt metaphor.

The title of Keeling’s presentation is borrowed from a line in Lucille Clifton’s famous poem, “Won’t You Celebrate With Me.” Inspired by Clifton’s formulation of the “spatial and temporal genesis” of self creation, Keeling looks to the generative properties of transduction as a bridge toward new potentialities of queer embodiment and subjectivities. Transduction, a term more common to life sciences than to queer theory, denotes “the idea that something conducts itself” or is “a self-propagating movement,” and thus appropriate to connect to notions of subjectivity and political movements where individual and collective agency are essential to efforts of liberation.

Transduction, Keeling asserts, mobilizes dynamic and “transindividual” queer identity formations, rather than universal and static models entrenched in prevailing gender, race and sexuality binaries. Noting the historicity and spatiality that are brought to bear upon subjectivity, Keeling asks, “Who or what is already becoming there” on the bridge “between starshine and clay?” What existing epistemologies, ontologies and sensibilities of self-becoming can be utilized to “ethically anchor” queer world-making in ways that make

it up as we go? Keeling suggests that we strip down layers of sedimentary meanings of assigned gender, sexuality, and racial identity accumulated through historical and social forces.

Dominant social paradigms that reinscribe dichotomies of heterosexuality and homosexuality onto bodies and discourses are ruptured by queer transduction, which moves forward, pushes outward and reaches inward, energizing its own exigencies and contingencies. It is queer on queer’s terms. Transduction entails a transfer of energy, rather than a usurping of it; signaling the creation of subjectivities in continual motion and flux, rather than a collision between two opposing forces, and the self-generative power in such transfers. Transduction, Keeling asserts, contains within it the notion of collaboration rather than confrontation. Thus, the transliberatory potential of queer transduction is to form, as Keeling noted, “another world, not a new world, but another world,” between the “starshine and clay” of existing models and movements and endless possibilities of personhood.

This vision of queer world-making, through the process of transduction, implies collaboration, rather than confrontation, as its collective mode. Keeling noted, “collaborations are difficult because they are always bound up with power” but a re-animation of queer entailing invention includes collaboration among people who

do not “properly belong to queer,” forging what Keeling describes as “unlikely and unexpected alliances.” Transduction then is another way of looking at the potential for cross-identifications among and between different groups and to locate trans-liberatory strains in other social movements. Queer transduction energizes the co-creation of meanings along multiple axis of subjectivity and political activism, transforming ourselves and our environment in mobile, malleable modes of becoming.

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SAVE THE DATE!

NEW MAJORITIES, SHIFTING PRIORITIES

DIFFERENCE AND DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY UNIVERSITY

**March 4 and 5, 2011
Royce Hall, UCLA**

The **UCLA Center for the Study of Women (CSW)** and **NYU Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality (CSGS)** have undertaken a year-long project to address the challenges currently facing the fields of gender and sexuality studies, women’s studies, **LGBT studies**, ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies. As the relevance of the work being done in these fields is being questioned, both curricular units and research units have seen budgets cut and many face the threat of downsizing or closure. As part of this project, the **CSW** will be hosting a two-day conference that will include public panels related to the way we define our programs, as well as how they are organized.