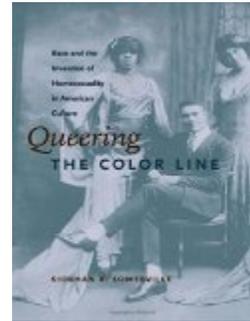


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Siobhan B. Somerville. *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2000. xi + 176 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2443-0.

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## Queering Disciplinary Boundaries

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*Queering the Color Line* sets out to correct what Somerville identifies as a persistent and regrettable tendency for contemporary Americans to think about race and sexuality as fundamentally different analytic categories. This tendency, she argues, has its origin in the historical processes through which modern conceptions of homosexuality developed in concert with late nineteenth century discourses on race. By tracing the historical interdependence of both scientific and popular theories of race and sexuality, Somerville accomplishes two significant goals. First, she demonstrates the value of queer-studies perspectives for interpreting texts previously analyzed primarily through the lens of race. Similarly, she shows that works previously treated as sources for the history of sexuality are illuminated by critical attention to the way they mobilize contemporary discourses of racialization. Second, she identifies a historical shift from a cultural system that relied on physical traits to differentiate people from one another, to a more modern one which focused on desire as the most meaningful axis of difference.

In the opening chapter Somerville spells out the connection between racial and sexual science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She argues that sexological descriptions of the “invert,” a sexually intermediate type halfway between “pure” male and “pure” female, drew upon the methods and conclusions that racial science had mobilized in its descriptions of mulattos and

other “half-breeds.” By the 1920s, however, the model of gender inversion had been replaced by a new model of homosexuality. This new model had no room for intermediate types; instead, it worked through a logic of polarized sexual difference, in which men were men and women were women. The homosexual thus came into being as a person who desired a member of his or her “own” sex.

Somerville argues that this new polarization of bodies and focus on desires reflected a similar, simultaneous shift in racial thinking. Over the same time period, the cultural figure of the mulatto gave way to a new vision of the races as natural opposites, and increasing numbers of legal and social mechanisms were put into place to prevent people of different races from having sex with one another. Thus the emergence of new sexual categories mirrored, and was profoundly influenced by, the hardening of the “color line,” the stark division of Americans into strictly segregated categories of “black” and “white.”

Chapter Two, “The Queer Career of Jim Crow,” turns from the elite discourses of science and law to the popular cultures of race and sex depicted in silent films. This chapter addresses the 1914 Vitagraph film “A Florida Enchantment,” which previous scholars have interpreted as a witty and lighthearted representation of gender fluidity and lesbian desire. In Somerville’s hands, however, the movie documents the intentional erasure of its legacy of racial violence and economic exploitation. This legacy, she shows, structured not only the plot of the novel from

which the screenplay was taken, but also the Florida film industry of which Vitagraph was a part.

Debarred from participating in either sexology or the film industry, African-American women often used fiction as a venue for articulating their thoughts and beliefs about race, gender and sexuality. Chapter Three explores Pauline E. Hopkins' novels *Contending Forces* and *Winona*, arguing that the barely articulated homoeroticism of both novels "circulates as part of Hopkins' exploration of the barriers to desire imposed by the color line" (p. 11). Chapter Four continues this argument in the context of James Weldon Johnson's famous *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Though the *Autobiography* has often been read as its author described it—the story of "some colored man who had married white" (p. 111)—Somerville demonstrates that it is also a story about the sexual fluidity of a man who lives in motion across the boundaries his culture insists are solid and impermeable. Finally, Chapter Five examines Jean Toomer's more radical "racial disidentification" (p. 130), that is, his refusal to take part in the cultural fiction of firmly bounded races.

While the first two chapters examine the historical intersection of race and sexuality in the nascent cultural institutions of sexology and cinema, the following three perform close readings of works by canonical African-American writers. Although each chapter contributes to the larger argument, the way Somerville shifts focus between the first and second halves of the book sometimes obscures the relationship of the parts to the whole. This presents a problem for the part of Somerville's project aimed at persuading readers of the value of merging the conventional strategies and interests of queer historical studies with African-American literary and cultural studies. Certainly each chapter demonstrates the value of sexual interpretation of racialized subjects, and vice versa; yet the difference between the text-centered analyses and context-driven historical interpretations remains striking.

Admittedly this difference is partly stylistic, but it also reflects the fact that Somerville's historical argument about the shift from bodies to desires fades from the center of analysis after the second chapter. In fact, chapters three through five seem to suggest that both systems of differentiation and classification remained in play for some time. Therefore, the change she describes might best be thought of as an "uneven development," to borrow Mary Poovey's phrase about the changing ideologies of gender in Victorian Britain [1]. When historical change is viewed in this light, the question of causality

must arise—why set these developments in racial/sexual discourse in motion, and what sorts of factors governed the pace and extent to which they were adopted or explored by ordinary Americans? Somerville's answer to the first question is a brief reference to Gilded Age whites' perceptions that their political dominance over the nation was in peril.

While this seems reasonably accurate as an observation about the political life of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is thin as an explanation for dramatic shifts in the organization of both racial and sexual thought. Neither does it speak directly to the question of why her three authors mobilized the culturally-available variants of racialized and sexualized humanity in such fascinatingly different ways. Thus historians are likely to see weaknesses in *Queering the Color Line* that will probably not bother literary scholars to any significant degree: and that difference suggests that the work has not quite achieved its goal of modeling a satisfyingly interdisciplinary cultural scholarship.

In the first chapter, where Somerville sets the stage for the argument of the book as a whole, her discussion of the nineteenth-century tendency to think about both race and sex in terms of mixture rests in part on her interpretation of sexual hierarchies as analogues to racial ones. She argues that mulattos and "intermediate" sexual types occupied similar conceptual spaces, in part because emergent theories of sexuality drew on existing theories of race. But some of the quotations she offers as evidence of this borrowing refer to a hierarchy of races that did not, in fact, work according to the logic of mixture (p. 32). In such hierarchies, white Europeans, red Native Americans, yellow Asians, tawny Polynesians, and black Africans were all understood as "pure" racial types. It is true that the "reds," "yellows," and "tawnys" were often represented as "between" whites and blacks in terms of physical beauty and the achievements of their civilizations, yet their "intermediate" status was not understood to derive from any mixture of the extremes between which they stood: such people were not "biracial," as Somerville suggests (p. 32). This raises the question of whether the "intermediate sex" might not have been constructed as an equally "pure" type. If it was not, the parallelism between the logics of sexual and racial classification was less consistent than Somerville argues. It therefore seems possible that Somerville's argument about mediation and mixture rests on a simplified understanding of the multiple structures according to which nineteenth-century racial science assigned value to different peoples and cultures.

To be fair, Somerville's focus on "race" is explicitly limited to discussions of the conceptual and social relationships between white and black Americans (p. 13); her lack of attention to the "reds" and "yellows" probably stems at least as much from her choice about where to set the boundaries of her study as it does from inattention to the Byzantine convolutions of the history of racist thought. Yet her occlusion of those not-quite-intermediate races has consequences in the way she reads two of the novels that provide the basis for the second half of the book. In one, Pauline Hopkins' *Winona*, the mulatto heroine is introduced in terms that make her sound like a character from *Hiawatha*: she has brown braids and trails her slim brown hand over the side of her canoe (p.100-101). Somerville's very interesting discussion of *Winona*'s adventures in blackface and male attire focuses on the way that her Blackening makes her homoerotic romance with a white man possible. When *Winona* puts on the makeup that renders her light skin more visibly mulatto, she also puts on a highly eroticized gender ambiguity, so that she passes for "the prettiest specimen of boyhood" her white friend has even seen (p. 102).

Somerville shows that the love and desire between *Winona* and her white friend are enabled by the complementary fictions of racial difference and sexual sameness. Yet surely it is important that Hopkins' narrative of racial and sexual transition and illusion is generated precisely by means of the contrast between the natural purity of the apparently Seneca maiden and the sexuality associated with Blackness, and especially with Black masculinity. Similarly, Somerville performs a sensitive reading of a pivotal scene in Jean Toomer's short story "Withered Skin of Berries." In this scene, a mulatto man who is passing for white calls himself an "Indian" as part of his effort to convince his homophobic, football-playing white friend that it is safe to give way to the desire between them (pp. 147-148). Somerville describes this scene as one in which "the black-white dichotomy is displaced

onto an Indian/white axis" (p. 147). But while Somerville is convincing about the way that the desire between these two men is enabled by the perception that they are of different races, her interpretation does not explain the way in which this scene depicts Native American bodies as importantly outside the economy of race and sexuality that governs relationships between whites and blacks. In both of these instances, Somerville's comparatively thin treatment of races which are neither white nor black limits her analysis; and the thinness of this treatment ultimately derives not only from the way she has defined her subject matter, but also from the way in which she reduces nineteenth-century racial hierarchies to the relationships between whites, Blacks, and their "mixed" mulatto offspring.

Despite these reservations, in the last chapter Somerville does succeed at modeling a highly fruitful multidisciplinary approach. Here Somerville asks, and answers, challenging theoretical questions about the relationship between racial and sexual discourse for the present as well as for the past. Her chapter on Jean Toomer, "'Queer to Myself as I Am To You,'" offers a highly convincing account of Toomer's fascination with the word "queer." She demonstrates that he used the term as a sign for both sexual and racial ambiguity; at the same time, Somerville emphasizes our scholarly stakes in making this case, and asks us to think about the relationship between our contemporary concerns and those of the historical subjects we study. The result is a breathtaking reassessment of Toomer's refusal to identify himself as African-American—a refusal which Somerville sees not as a repudiation of his "real" race but rather as a refusal to live, or to write, as though racial and sexual identities were solidly factual, unchanging conditions of human being. In sum, though *Queering the Color Line* has some of the weaknesses characteristic of ambitious first books, it is a rewarding and valuable addition to the growing literature exploring the relationship between race and sexuality in American culture.

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