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A Reflection on the Work of Late Yale Professor Sam See

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A Reflection on the Work of Late Yale Professor Sam See

Part of the journal section “Reviews and Responses”

Sarah E. Kersh, "Your Evolving UNI Library: Spaces, Sources, and Services for Graduate Research”

Over the course of his too-short career, Sam See’s scholarship focused on queerness, race, and form in American and British Modernism. See’s work examines texts by a range of authors including canonical figures such as Henry James, Langston Hughes, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemingway, and more marginalized writers such as Djuna Barnes, and Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler. In his essay on Ford and Tyler’s 1933 novel *The Young and the Evil*, he argues for an analysis of the text’s “generically dual ambitions...[which,] I propose, enable contemporary literary historians to make modernism new” (1078). Understanding ‘duality’ is at the heart of See’s scholarship—across his work he tackles the confluence of seemingly opposing generic forms—drama and the novel, tragedy and comedy, literature and visual culture—as well as complicates current formulations of performance, camp, race, drag, nature, and myth.

Queerness, in See’s work, functions as a fulcrum, as he says in his essay on early-modern poet Richard Barnfield, to challenge “identitarian taxonomies” (65). Troubling identitarian taxonomies is a concept to which See returns to in later articles in part because, as he quotes from José Muñoz, “[I]dentity practices such as queerness and hybridity are not a priori sites of contestation but, instead, spaces of productivity where identity’s fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated” (as quoted in “Spectacles” 803). See’s articles combine close readings of primary texts and queer theory, but also call into question our own modes of literary analysis pushing literary scholarships’ “critical narratives about how modernist writers view sex and its sciences” (“Queer Natures” 3). It is the convergence of racial, gender, and sexual taxonomies—and the resulting divergence of them—that See uses to produce rich and productive understandings of modernist literature and modernist thought.

In his *PMLA* article “Spectacles in Color,” See considers what he calls the “primitive drag” of Langston Hughes’ volume *The Weary Blues*. Here, he close reads “drag,” “crossing,” and “color” in order to highlight the, often overlooked, confluence of race and queerness in the poems. Hughes’ “texts capitalize on their generic performativity, for their speakers are typically ungendered and unraced, which makes them read like drag performers who manipulate visual representation for affective ends” (800). What See calls attention to in Hughes’ volume is the link between blues and drag performance: “in both the blues and drag aesthetics, those [affective] ends are the chiasmatically linked feelings of mournful laughter and joyful sadness”

(800). Similarly, See's essay on Woolf's *Between the Acts*, begins by foregrounding Woolf's use of "concentrate" as a comment on the politics of community in her late work. "Concentration," suggests See, "highlights a central aesthetic and ethical paradigm in [Woolf's] late work" (640).

If, in Hughes' poems, See utilizes chiasmus as a formalistic link between the poetics of *The Weary Blues* and Hughes' rejection of "both binary and syncretic thought" (803), he points to the problem of *Between the Acts*' literary form—a generic tension between drama and novel, tragedy and comedy—as the linchpin of Woolf's feminist politics. He writes, "Woolf's aesthetic of concentration distills the tragedy of civilization into a comedy of nature. Woolf pits the historically subordinate, feminized mode of comedy against the traditionally dominant, masculinized mode of tragedy to create a formal allegory for the novel's feminist politics" (643). Echoing Muñoz's link between queerness and hybridity, See quotes from Woolf's essays where she longs for a literary form capable of "monstrous, hybrid, unmanageable emotions" and "that queer conglomeration of incongruous things—the modern mind" (653). In his work, See locates the "queer conglomeration of incongruous things." He points to the tension of dual ambitions, the rejection of binarism, and the production of syncretic thought in modernist literature as the very methods of foregrounding queerness, fragmentation, and negotiation in "the modern mind."

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