
José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Cultural Studies of the Americas 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 227p.

CURTIS WASSON
YALE UNIVERSITY

Carmelita Tropicana (the stage name/persona of Alina Troyano) has as her motto an idea that is central to José Esteban Muñoz's work *Disidentifications*: namely, that "your *Kunst* is your *Waffen*," your art is your weapon (137). Muñoz views, in the artistic practices/performances he catalogues, re- and mis-appropriations of the cultural objects, practices, and discourses that serve to oppress queers, people of color, and queer people of color. These appropriations function in order both to acknowledge the hold oppressive discourses have on marginal subjects and to challenge the hegemonic nature and totality of such discourses. Art used as a weapon can be seen in those performances that demonstrate the flawed and problematic nature of oppressive discourses by recycling them as part of "strategies of iteration and reiteration" in "performative acts of conjuring that deform and reform the world" (196).

The practice of disidentification, then, imagines new worlds, but only on the basis of the old. Its strategies of understanding and representing do not emanate from the oft-cited dictum to take what is good while discarding the bad. Rather, disidentificatory practices seek to recycle in a questioning vein what is oppressive, while maintaining the existence of that which is being called into question by breathing new life into it (12). Since disidentificatory practices depend on the discourses they work within and challenge for their existence, disidentification as a term cannot be easily pinned down or defined *a priori*. Examples of disidentificatory reading/performing practices include the reception of Mapplethorpe's photography of black male nudes by gay men of color; the video artist Richard Fung's intervention in gay male pornography, which succeeds in displacing the typical tropes and relationships of power of the genre; the drag queen/performance artist Vaginal Creme Davis' creative inhabiting of the persona of a white supremacist, as well as her 'anti-gay' critique of gay white male privilege; Ela and Alina Troyano's use of camp, *choteo*, *burla*, *chusmería*, and drag; Pedro Zamora's counterpublic performances on MTV of a queer of color living with HIV; and Felix Gonzalez-Torres' art, which traces absences instead of identities.

Muñoz's analysis of these and other cultural texts is often highly suggestive and, especially in the chapters on Richard Fung, Vaginal Creme Davis, the Troyano sisters, and Pedro Zamora, generally quite convincing and clear. The breadth of

knowledge, both of theoretical currents and of the performances he documents, and the commitment that Muñoz brings to his work is impressive and challenging. If there is a criticism to be levied against this work, however, it is that the analyses Muñoz offers the reader sometimes stray too far afield, and are often more suggestive than concrete. The introduction of *Disidentifications*, for example, discusses far too many texts in a too-cursory fashion for one to get a clear sense of what disidentification is or might be. Defining disidentification would have been a challenging task, but it might have served Muñoz to do so in his introduction. The first two chapters (on Basquiat and Andy Warhol; and on James Van DerZee, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston*), as well as significant portions of Chapter Seven (on the art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' art), also suffer from this lack of development. This is not to suggest that *Disidentifications* is not a worthwhile or necessary text, for I feel it is a valuable intervention that interrogates the heteronormativity of minority communities and theories, and the racism of queer ones.