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**“Write Something that Somebody can Use”:
Openness, Porosity, and Opportunities for Others to do Their Own Things**

An Interview with Rod Ferguson, *Yale University*

Interviewers: Alessandra Del Brocco and Ivy Faye Monroe, *University of Kentucky*

Roderick (Rod) A. Ferguson is Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University. He received his B.A. from Howard University and his Ph.D. from the University of California, San Diego. An interdisciplinary scholar, his work traverses such fields as American Studies, gender studies, queer studies, cultural studies, African American Studies, sociology, literature, and education. He is the author of One-Dimensional Queer [Polity, 2019], We Demand: The University and Student Protests [University of California, 2017], The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference [University of Minnesota, 2012], and Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique [University of Minnesota, 2004]. He is the co-editor with Grace Hong of the anthology Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization [Duke University, 2011]. He is also co-editor with Erica Edwards and Jeffrey Ogbar of Keywords of African American Studies [NYU, 2018]. He is currently working on two monographs - In View of the Tradition: Art and Black Radicalism and The Bookshop of Black Queer Diaspora. Ferguson is the 2020 recipient of the Kessler Award from the Center for LGBTQ Studies. Ferguson’s teaching interests include the politics of culture, women of color feminism, the study of race, critical university studies, queer social movements, and social theory.

Ivy Faye Monroe (IFM): *To begin this discussion, we would like to pick up where we began our in-class discussion with you on how you understand and use queer theory. There you defined queer theory as a method of both disrupting the homo/hetero divide and revealing the unviable nature of that divide. As gender and sexual identities cannot be understood separate from racialized identities, we were hoping you might elaborate on your initial definition as you see it relating to structures surrounding race, class, and gender. We’re specifically interested in these terms as queer theory might productively rethink past scholarship that has falsely assumed them as equivalent historical formations.*

Rod Ferguson (RF): Okay. I’ve always tried to approach queer theory with a kind of relational and coalitional spirit. And so, for me it’s been about putting queer theory in dialogue with things like women of color feminisms, Black feminisms, theories of intersectionality, Marxism, and what have you. And I really first came to the study of racialized sexuality not through queer theory, but through Black feminism, in particular. And so, when I got to queer theory, I necessarily thought that I had to make certain adjustments if I wanted to arrive at race – certainly if I wanted to arrive at the critiques of state capital. And, you know, it was really Black feminism, particularly, and women of color feminism, that, satisfied those elements at the time much more so than queer theory.

And so, the engagement with queer theory was about, not just for me but for other people, renovating its engagement with sexuality so that sexuality would be open to those other areas as well. So, if you think about the work that, you know, José Muñoz was doing, Gayatri Gopinath, Martin Manalansan, Chandan Reddy, all of us were trying to renovate queer theory, by

putting it in conversation with anti-racist feminisms. And so, for me it has been important to keep those genealogies together. So, that's my understanding, which is a revised understanding of queer theory. Does that answer the question?

IFM: *Yes. I mean, I think it's I think it's sort of fabulous how everyone arrives at queer theory by a different way and differently view it as a productive tool. I appreciate this coalitional aspect you mentioned, it definitely answers the question. Thank you.*

Alessandra Del Brocco (ADB): *And I think the coalitional nature of [queer theory], and also the alternative routes that Ivy mentioned, are a great lead-in to our next question. From our class discussion, you spoke to the inspiration that Toni Morrison has provided for you on the importance of writing in ways that invite the reader to be this co-constructive force in the text through the act of reading. And then we were thinking about your quote that "one cannot inspire collective formation if you're trying to say it all yourself," and we wanted to ask if there are other writers who come to mind who write this way? Who are some writers, and what might be some passages that keep you going? And what advice do you have to junior scholars to aim to make their work in that collective formation?*

RF: Okay. Well, let's see. I was introduced to the notion that Toni Morrison employs what people used to call the gaps in her work. So, she set out to produce these gaps in the work that would provide space for the reader to create the text alongside her. I was presented with that notion in an independent study my first year of graduate school that I had with the poet Quincy Troupe at UC [University of California] San Diego. Troupe was one of Toni Morrison's authors when she was working at Random House. He was the one who pointed that out to me. He was also the one linked it to a writer that I had discovered, while an undergraduate at Howard, who was also Toni Morrison's author, when she was at Random House, and his name was Henry Dumas. He was a poet who wrote *Ark of Bones*, these wonderful poetry collections - *Knees of a Natural Man* is one that comes to mind.

And what I was told was that Morrison got the notion of the gaps from his work. And you can see it in, especially, his short stories. Where in, what was pretty much an unfinished novel that was still published, called *Ark of Bones*, where there's an ark. It starts out as a small ark, but then after a while the ark continues to grow without actually announcing its growth. And so, you're sort of reading along, you're midway through, and you think, "wait there's no way this ark can have a soul" - it can have this, it can have that. And he never tells you how the ark expands in size, but you realize after a while that you unconsciously have created and imagined this ark because of the gaps he inserted into the narrative. So, he's an author that comes to mind.

Morrison, in interviews, also cites folklore, as another model - in fact, perhaps the founding model, of the narrative that deliberately leaves room for the reader or the teller to create over and over again. So, when I was working on the second book, *The Reorder of Things*, I was deliberately trying to base certain narrative techniques - which is a weird word to use when

you're talking about theory and critical scholarship - but certain narrative techniques in that book on folklore. So those are things that come to mind.

And you also ask the last question was, passages, or inspirational models for junior scholars. So, I said this before in another interview that my dear friend, colleague, and former advisor Lisa Lowe said to me maybe 20 years ago: “don't try to be brilliant, write something somebody can use.”

And what I heard her saying in that moment was that, you know, the sort of desire to perform brilliance is precisely antithetical to leaving room for other people within the text because you want to present yourself as the definitive expert on this thing. And there's all kinds of encouragement to do that in the academy and then the publishing world, but it's really antithetical to the idea of the text being open and deliberately porous so that someone else can come in and fill the text with their own interpretations and idioms and uses. So that would be the advice that I would give to folks. Write something that somebody can use. And use, in this sense, also means giving them the resources by which they can create their own thing.

IFM: *Following up on that idea of writing something that somebody can use, I was wondering how, then, you make decisions around what to write and what to leave out? And you've mentioned the reader a couple of times; we were wondering who you write for, who do you imagine yourself writing for when you're going through writing? And do you think it's ever best to write without the reader in mind?*

RF: In terms of the decisions of what to leave in and what to take, it really depends upon the text and it's oftentimes arbitrary. There are moments where I'm like, “okay, I could go down this rabbit hole and it's really, really interesting to me,” and then I decide I'll leave it out, “you don't need, you don't need it.” It can live at the level of my consciousness as a reader, but it doesn't necessarily need to be, you know, in the text itself, I don't have to deploy it as a writer. And sometimes it's just about, you know, this is an avenue that I bet someone else could do something really interesting with, let me leave it for them. So sometimes there's a kind of arbitrariness to it. Right.

At other times it's about, alright, this book I imagine is being written for graduate students, so I'm also using this book to train folks, so let me get into the granular details of this genealogy and the nuances of this genealogy and its differences from another formation's genealogy because I want to model for the graduate student reader how the mind nuances and details in genealogies, and that those things matter. But I don't necessarily need that when I'm working on a book that I imagine for undergraduate and for public audiences, because I'm not trying to train them. I'm trying to give them something to think about that they can use in whatever they're doing in the world and all the myriad professions that they might be involved in, but it's not so that they can eventually write their own scholarship. You know?

In terms of the readers that I bring with me, it changes from book to book. You know who in general you always want in the room with you as you sit down to write, you want to imagine your ideal audience for that book. In graduate school, I had in the room with me the advisors that encouraged me. I also had in the room with me my graduate student colleagues who are encouraging me or whose work inspired me. I had in that room the writers who I didn't know, but I lived with them in the sense that I live with them intellectually. When I was working on - those are like the first two books, because they were written for grad students - and the last few books were an experiment in writing for undergraduate audiences and for public audiences. And so, I imagine the undergraduates who are responsive to me as a teacher, who asked me things like: "what books are you reading or what would you recommend us on this subject?" And, you know, "I want to do this kind of work, can you help me think about how I might engage in this work as a scholar or as an activist?" Or, as an emerging scholar or emerging activist.

And so that was that. In terms of the question of would I ever want to write without a reader in mind, absolutely not. That's an easy one. Absolutely not. Because I have read work that I know was written without a reader in mind. The prose is often bad, for one thing. Because that's the thing, imagining a reader and writing for reader is a mechanism that really asks you as a writer to choose to make certain choices based on who you want to reach. And in those moments where I have detected that certain writers write without a reader in mind, it always seems like they're writing for reasons that I would never endorse: ego or self-aggrandizement, or to sound smart, or to win, you know, a kind of suspect admiration from folks in the profession or from students, you know, and never to make a connection. Writing without a reader in mind, it's an anti-relational maneuver. The reader is your compass and the writer's reason for setting out in a particular direction. You can't write work somebody's going to use if there is no someone for you.

ADB: *Okay, amazing. Thank you. In this next question, we kind of shift from the how of the writing to more of the content and what we're writing. Looking to these last few years, and how scholarship on a trans of color critique has been defined through the work of scholars including Jules Gill-Peterson, C. Riley Snorton, and Jian Chen, we are looking to both how a queer of color critique has evolved since the publication of *Aberrations in Black* in 2004 and how trans of color critique has expanded upon your writings. And we are wondering how you understand that relationship between the queer of color critique and the trans of color critique and how you imagine or maybe wish or hope that this relationship with evolve into the future. And then finally, how do you see either or both of these relating to the broader field of *Queer Studies*?*

RF: Okay. Well, you know, I'm probably not the best person to answer the question about the evolution of queer of color critique. Because my position early on was that I was not going to be interventionist about it, and I was also not going to make it into my own personal cottage industry. I wrote it so hopefully it will inspire people - they will create their own idioms, but I'm going to go do something else. So, I don't really spend a lot of time tracking queer of color critique, per se.

I have been very gratified, and heartened by the folks working in trans of color who are trying to - or in trans studies in general - who have found inspiration in what I wrote in *Aberrations* and that has been really gratifying and at times surprising to me because my sense, when I wrote that book and afterwards, is that I always felt I wanted to do more with the trans figures in that book. But I felt that I could only do so much with the available idioms and frameworks in trans studies at the time, you know. So, I'm really gratified that people have just sort of taken the ball and run with it in trans of color work or trans of color critique. And that has been very, very warming to me.

IFM: *I mean, 2004 was definitely a very different era for trans studies and trans scholarship.*

RF: Yeah, and the thing is I didn't know that until like, I remember the first person to suggest that to me was Dean Spade where we were on a panel in Montreal at McGill Law School where he began with this really generous introduction before he gave his remarks about how *Aberrations* opened doors for him. And then C. Riley Snorton did the same thing, when he was a junior faculty at Northwestern, when I gave a talk there and it was a revelation to me really; I mean, because I kept thinking: "oh I wish, I know there should be more done with, you know, the trans figures in this text but I don't - I'm not ready yet because I don't have it." The models just kind of weren't there. So, hearing it was a pivotal test, right oh wow that's amazing.

IFM: *Something there about leaving the text open.*

RF: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, leaving the text open. And so, I think that's what's been so gratifying to me is that people really inhabit the gaps in that text.

IFM: *I love that. Continuing on with Aberrations, you wrote about the Western academy as a canonically driven institution that has historically worked to socialize subjects into the state through limited and limiting processes or promises of acceptability. As you're writing about queer of color critique as working against these historical formations, how do you balance your position as a member of the academy with the urgent and necessary work of dismantling its exclusionary colonial and racing structures?*

RF: Yeah, well, you know, that's always a fine line. It really is a daily exercise in how do you be in it but not of it. And in that moment, the older sense of the word discipline – not the Foucauldian sense of the word discipline - is really meaningful to me, like discipline in the sense of, kind of, almost theological sense of how do you hold fast to a vision. Like you know the phrases. Keep your eyes on the prize. And to know that the prize is never administrative power. It's never administrative status. It's never institutional rewards, but it is always about trying to produce work that will yield certain community and critical formations and allow people to make their own collective and critical formation. That for me is always the prize, and I always try to measure my actions., as an administrator, by that. Is this really opening something for somebody, or is it just sort of administrative exercise for university branding, or for the extension of university power, you know?

And I'm always clear with myself. I'm chair of the department now. I've been in the academy for like 21 years as a professor and for 17 of them I've been an administrator of some sort because I went up for early tenure. And only learned after that that really meant launching me into administration early rather than into more research. I'm always clear that I am primarily a teacher and a scholar and writer. And that those are my primary identities, and when I have to do administration it is in the service of those two functions. So, it also informs my work when I'm in administrative roles: is this furthering, not just my relationship to teaching and writing, but is it furthering the potential for other people to be teachers and writers?

IFM: *Thank you. I feel like a recurring theme through a lot of your answers is that you've paid a lot of attention, and put a lot of thought, into how you position yourself and what you're trying to do and what you're trying to write. And I just appreciate how clearly you're able to articulate that particularly as were publishing this for other grad students and junior faculty who are trying to figure those sorts of things out as they enter their career.*

ADB: *Yeah, absolutely. Okay, so I think we're concluding with the sixth question, which is where we would like to discuss how your work has evolved over time. And so, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* was published in 2004 and functions as this really lovely precursor to your more recent writings in *One-Dimensional Queer* and also your current interests in the bookshop and the Black queer diaspora. So, we were hoping that you might speak to how your process around doing research has evolved over time and drawing from what you've learned in the course of your work, what advice you might give to young scholars?*

RF: Yeah. I remember a really instructive conversation that I had with Lisa Lowe. I was finishing up, in fact I think I was about ready to defend, and then she took me out for dessert. She was beginning to work on the book that came to be *The Intimacies of Four Continents* and she said: "I really want to use this book to reinvent myself."

And that inspired me to think of each text as a way to reinvent myself. That for some people, I guess, *One-Dimensional Queer* may not seem like a reinvention, but it was in a sense of, how do I as someone who has written for graduate students, has talked about queer social movements, trans social movements, what have you as big theoretical engagements, write a text that, one, looks at movements that I haven't looked at before - you know, the ones in the [19]70s in particular - and also deliver that conversation to undergraduate and popular audiences. So that was part of a kind of an ongoing reinvention in terms of, how do I do what I do in the classroom in the book? Particularly the undergraduate classroom.

So, I always think of each text as a way to reinvent myself, rather than just live in already-established domains, the domains that I established with previous texts, and to remake myself. This is also why I favor, actually, books over articles and essays. I do write a lot of articles and I write a lot of essays, but those are usually because people request those from me. I really, really favor books and writing books.

Toni Cade Bambara said this thing once, when she was asked about what it means to write a novel versus writing a short story, which was really her main idiom - she was working on *The Salt Eater* and later *These Bones Are Not My Child* but had written all of these short stories and was known as someone who had really innovated the short story form. And she said this thing, well, “a short story is a piece of time, but a novel is a way of life” in terms of what it exacts from the writer.

And that's how I think of essays and articles versus books. That I want a new way of life with each book. And a book gives me the sort of breath to produce a new way of life for myself. So, *The Reorder of Things* was about turning myself into someone who could think through the history of the American academy, the Western academy, and the end to disciplines. And that was an interesting exercise because at first I thought, “who’s going to read a book about the academy? Who wants to read a whole book about the academy?” This was in that moment right before critical university studies started to come out. So, I had to reinvent myself as someone who could write that book, but also make that book interesting to the reader and not put to sleep by the content.

And so, I’m on another two books. A short book in the spirit of *One-Dimensional Queer, We Demand*. And that’s a book on contemporary Black diasporic art and Black radical traditions. Again, a challenge that I set up for myself: how do I write a book that will appeal to undergraduates and popular audiences about the Black radical tradition and Black contemporary art - two things that don't really live in popular discourse. And in many instances don't live in undergraduate contexts, either. So that's one. And then *The Bookshop of Black Queer Diaspora* which is also about art.

So those are reinventions having to do with producing a way of life for myself that is immersed in conversations around and histories around art and its intersections with politics. So, if you want to keep the adventure going, I recommend that. And you could do it with articles and essays, too, it just so happens that my favorite form is of the book. But to think of each text as a way to build your own self-reinvention.

IFM: *Thank you for your time!*

ADB: *Yes, thank you!*