

Kevin Floyd: *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)

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1 Kevin Floyd begins *The Reification of Desire* at an impasse between Marxist and queer theory on a snowy night in New England when he missed Judith Butler's appearance at a *Rethinking Marxism* conference. From there Floyd attempts a reconciliation between Marxism and queer theory via historicizing arguments that scrutinize social, economic, and political practices and norms in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Floyd's path "toward a queer Marxism" traces economic and sexual regulation over the last one hundred years in the United States. The path is marked by vivid examples and theoretical complexity—for example, a fishing scene from *The Sun Also Rises* appears as an intersection of failed masculinity and deskilled labor, and gay pictorials from the 1950s and 1960s serve as evidence for an unregulated, covert economy of desire. Floyd's combination of textual analysis with philosophical reflection promises to make the book a new classic in queer studies.

2 Floyd's comparisons of theoretical positions and his analyses of films, magazines, and novels build upon a chronological structure that starts with Taylorism and psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century and arrives at neoliberalism and queer worldmaking in the twenty-first. The critique of capitalist and heteronormative structures during this period benefits from Floyd's ability to develop arguments on multiple levels and at different pitches. This quality also enhances the connections he makes between perhaps unlikely interlocutors such as Lukács and Foucault; Butler and Hemingway; or Jameson and *Midnight Cowboy*.

3 Floyd's book makes the most of queer theory's eclecticism and strategic ambiguity. He argues throughout for keeping theoretical frameworks flexible and exploratory instead of drawing stark lines of demarcation and setting up boundaries between terminologies and ideologies. Indeed, he explicitly characterizes his treatment of Marxism as an open theoretical system. Those wishing for clear, but predetermined, definitions of Floyd's key terms—"reification" and "totality"—might find his recursive method too labor intensive. But in order to develop new ways of understanding the term "reification," Floyd claims that we need to follow its diverse connotations and permutations (25). Floyd never does deliver a simple answer or final definition. However, it is clear by the end of the book that his early abstract formulations are part of the book's architecture and ultimately connected to localized instances of both reification and totality thinking. For instance, in the introduction Floyd

writes, “Reification compels an experience of privatization and isolation, an experience of exchange relations as impermeable to human intervention” (17). Each link in this chain of terms becomes part of the material history of regulating desire. From Lukács’s implicit heteronormative moral imperatives in chapter one to the final discussions concerning the sexual, racial, and economic rezoning of Greenwich Village, the book links past and present, abstract and concrete. Floyd’s self-description of the book as “a queer variation on the dialectic of reification and totality” (32) implies more than just a codetermining relationship between the two terms. The book is also dialectic in a Hegelian sense, as it leads the reader through a cognitive process to help us grasp terms that, at first, seemed mere abstractions.

4 Part of what makes this history and dialectical journey coherent and innovative is the incorporation of regulation theory throughout the book. By focusing on the accumulation of capital, Floyd presents his most compelling parallels between Marxism and queer history. He shows how the regulation of financial capital functions similarly to the regulation of sexuality and, thus, connects Taylorism and psychoanalysis, skilled labor and masculinity, and cowboys and Fordism. The notion that the production and consumption of psychoanalytic knowledge of the self was similar to the controlled environment of the factory under Taylorism implies that, according to Floyd, the personal, individual body--of the skilled worker and of the sexual (male) individual--was no longer within the realm of personal knowledge of one’s self. This connection between labor and sexuality opens the door to a critical rethinking of central tenets of queer theory regarding the body, performance, and questions of agency. Indeed, Floyd takes up this task and challenges aspects of Michel Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s writings on the body and power. The critique of queer theorists, in turn, draws attention to the premises of the Marxist theorists that Floyd vigorously questions. The result is dialogue facilitated by Floyd’s willingness to explore possibilities.

5 While Floyd proves his competence in navigating multiple theoretical texts at once, his own theoretical stance vis-à-vis the body seems essentializing, which from a queer perspective is problematic. Though he makes quick work of Žižek’s posturing with the “real,” he himself relies on a natural, real masculine body that exists somewhere beyond/before twentieth-century America. This reified body appears when Floyd differentiates between manhood and masculinity. This terminological distinction is important to his criticism of both Butler and Žižek, as he indicates various ahistorical elements in their conceptualizations of (gender) reality and shows how “performativity” itself is a historical concept that follows the nineteenth-century physiological understanding of gender and identity. To be sure, this

critical perspective on Butler and performativity is one of Floyd's most interesting contributions to future gender theory debates. However, in the broader scope of his argument, the distinction between manhood and masculinity risks reinscribing modes of regulation that Floyd otherwise deconstructs and to which he clearly objects. While Floyd does admit that even manhood (and womanhood) might be understood as performative (90), the distinction between manhood and masculinity destabilizes the book's queer critical edge—as it turns to a nostalgic logic of gender identity. Floyd posits a pre-capitalist male body with its manhood intact. With Taylorism's deskilling of labor and psychoanalysis's deskilling of sexual self-knowledge comes the severing of man from manhood. The new term "masculinity" appears as a superficial semblance of what the working man once was.

6 And yet, *The Reification of Desire* itself sensitizes us to the very kind of critique that one might level against it. Floyd's treatment of the manhood-masculinity divide is less a blemish on his otherwise admirable blend of theoretical debates and cultural analysis than it is a testament to the book's critical potential. One of Floyd's greatest strengths is his way of simultaneously invoking a theoretical stand point, criticizing it, and exploring new approaches to think through it. A case in point: when he presents *Midnight Cowboy* as an allegory, he also investigates the idea of allegory itself, situating it within the context of Fredric Jameson's work. He then complicates his analysis of the film by way of a critique of Jameson's concept of national allegory. The book is full of these recursive moments, in which Floyd demonstrates sharp reflexive thinking. Thus, any criticism of the book's lacks or oversights might be better framed as invitations for continued debate.

7 Floyd does not engage in the type of "totality thinking" that he disparages, one that would supply his readers with a master schema for understanding all aspects of society—even when the current relevance of his arguments seems quite pervasive. Indeed, one of the most telling signs that *The Reification of Desire* will become a key book in the field of queer theory (and perhaps beyond) is its knack for contributing to an understanding of even the most recent economic and political events. While writing this review, the Occupy Wall Street movement was evicted from Zuccotti Park, a "Privately Owned Public Space" (Foderaro). Within the context of Floyd's work, this designation takes on a relevance that extends beyond OWS. The privatization of public spaces is just one of many instances related to issues of sexuality, identity, and modes of desire. Floyd's treatment of the sexual rezoning of New York City provides a historical context for the acute tensions that are finding expression today in demonstrations across the United States. Not only does *The Reification of Desire* encourage broad analytical thinking, but it also invites us to consider how abstract concepts and concrete

realities shape the past and, moreover, how they might give way to a future that is more integrating and less violent in its regulation and reification of desire.

8 *The Reification of Desire* should be a required book in any library collection that supports research in the fields of queer theory, gender studies, cultural studies, and Marxist-based literary theory. Floyd's clear style and efficient prose make the book ideal for advanced undergraduate courses and graduate seminars that examine the relationship between sexuality and culture, especially in an American context. As his first published monograph, *The Reification of Desire* establishes Kevin Floyd as an innovative voice in philosophical and cultural debates on sexuality and desire.