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On Queer Secrecy

Joshua Gunn

Grindstaff, D.A. (2006). *Rhetorical Secrets: Mapping Gay Identity and Queer Resistance in Contemporary America*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 194 pp. ISBN: 0817315063. \$36.50.

One of the many pleasures of reading Davin Allen Grindstaff's study—or I should say, one of the ways in which the reader is suspended between an erotics of pleasure and pain—lies in the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which the author displaces the cum-shot to the off-screen of the book's preconscious. Although ostensibly about secrecy, at the literal and figurative center of *Rhetorical Secrets: Mapping Gay Identity and Queer Resistance in Contemporary America*, Grindstaff argues for an "ethic of fluidity" premised on "semen's ability to function as synecdoche for male subjectivity," but in a way that embraces its connotations of danger and contagion as an emblem of possibility (p. 85; also see pp. 131–132). Inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, Grindstaff writes that since antiquity semen has been yoked to male subjectivity in ways that implicate a troubling tendency toward (ideational) solidity and containment as a way to stabilize—or, better, dam-up—male identity, a tendency that is no more obvious than in filmic pornography: either solo or with a partner, the male "pulls out" to squirt his "load" deliriously into the air or—as is more frequently common—onto the face of a motionless yet ravenously passive lover. Although it is unclear whether the cum-shot has since become a common, private practice in the everyday bedroom, most critics agree that visible ejaculation was originally a pornographic, filmic innovation "to 'prove' that the sex is 'real'" and provide a sense of closure to a given scene (Slade, 1997, p. 129).

Insofar as the meaning of the cum-shot for spectators remains contested (Dyer, 1985; Patton, 1989), however, Grindstaff's argument about the synecdochic virility of the *figure* of semen resists the cum-shot as a "closure" or the solipsistic scene of male self-identification (e.g., "I am coming!") in favor of exposing the paradoxical, open, and relational work of subjectification betokened by ejaculate as a synecdochic figure of both cathexis and elusive mutability (e.g., "every-body, my body, your body, our

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body, comes . . . right?”). In other words, in *Rhetorical Secrets* Grindstaff is careful to describe the ways in which the figure of semen both rhetorically establishes and upends masculine subjectivity and the embodied scenes of enjoyment: “The body is more than merely the residence of one’s sexual identity,” Grindstaff concludes, it “is also a collective entity, responsive and responsible to others.” Signaling a Deleuzian allegiance, Grindstaff advocates a public “desiring” of multiplicity and both/and, which is the queer community’s “most powerful form of resistance” and the better route for coming together as a queer body politic (p. 156).

I’ve opened this review deliberately with the cum-shot because the shock it may instill in some readers helps to underscore the publicity of pleasure *Rhetorical Secrets* advocates as well as the liminal, performative place Grindstaff would seduce readers to go. Although male ejaculate is the topic of Chapter 4 alone, those who are easily offended by the “public” discussion of presumably “private” events may not take pleasure in Grindstaff’s study, and, in particular, the deliciously erotic, first-person narratives of the author’s intercourse with Melville’s *Billy Budd* (pp. 42–55); such readers may be repulsed by the arousing ways in which Grindstaff describes how a muscle-bound stud in a phone sex advertisement “fucks me with his eyes” (pp. 119–123), or turned off by the (very) close reading of Allan Gurganus’s yearning yarn of a bloody and polymorphous “hooking” ho-down (pp. 139–148). However, to ignore this monograph because of these hard-core hermeneutic hook(ing)-ups would be a mistake, for the significance of *Rhetorical Secrets* is precisely its willingness to publicize the heterosexist assumptions of propriety that render gay male subjectivity a “performative contradiction” in a way that is *enjoyable* for the queer and straight alike. In other words, Grindstaff’s book is not only for those interested in learning about the rhetorical construction of gay male identity. *Rhetorical Secrets* also endeavors to explain how that identity is discursively produced by and among those who both deny and promote homophilia. Everyone’s desiring is implicated in the project of gay male identity, and Grindstaff achieves this insight not only argumentatively, but in the way the text is “performed” itself: after a many-paged, highly theoretical discussion, sometimes the reader may suddenly find him- or herself in bed with Grindstaff as he slides to first-person descriptions of his thoughts and feelings about bodies in homoerotic encounter. This said, in addition to detailing the basic argument of the book, it is important to foreground the author’s explicit commitment to the performative dimension of identity and politics and the way in which the book issues both desirous invitation and erotic repulse as techniques of self-evidence.

Key to understanding the performative seduction of Grindstaff’s text is the (un)comfortable, in-between space that the author designates as the locus of homosexual identity, which is also another reason that I opened with the example of the cum-shot: as cultural innovation, the cum-shot betokens the public/private binary Grindstaff is at pains to upend as both a double-bind and a condition of queer identity today. Just as the cum-shot is the seemingly “private” practice that has been publicized as the *sine qua non* of pornography, or rather, just as one should keep presumably private events like male orgasm out of public discussion in a respectable

scholarly journal, so has the supposed “secret” of one’s sexual life become a “public” issue in the creation of a queer identity that is supposed to remain private. The paradox is implicit in a platitude I’ve heard many times in casual conversation: “What you do in your own bedroom is your own damn business!” Implied in the object of “what you do” is a “but,” the “but” or bare bottom of secrecy that is literally outed in the public defense of privacy.

Extending the work of Charles Morris on passing (Morris, 2002, 2005), in Chapter 1 Grindstaff persuasively argues that queer agency “requires the performance of the private in public,” and thus “the closet” becomes a dynamic idiom of gay male identity that is continuously negotiated in public space (*viz.*, it is the core of gay male “performativity” in Judith Butler’s sense of the term; p. 20). This is because homosexuality as a category is a historically specific, modern production of sexual deviance, meaning that to recognize oneself as having a gay identity was and is also to harbor a secret pathology. To identify as a gay man today I either have to harbor a secret (pass) or must gesture toward its revelation (come out) such that the rhetorical structure of homosexuality is homologous to the form of the secrecy itself. Understood as a category rooted in pathology, gay male identity is the product of what Grindstaff terms the rhetorical secret, a “trope” that betokens a retroactively posed “Truth” as well as spatial movements across “insides and outsides” (p. 91). The rhetorical secret is mutable and dynamic and is shown to work in different ways in differing contexts: reading homoerotic literature (Chapter 1); legal argument (Chapter 2); HIV/AIDS discourse (Chapter 3); public gay eroticism and erotica (Chapter 4); and coming out discourse (Chapter 5).

Of the five case studies in which Grindstaff locates the rhetorical secret in action, the second chapter, “The Essential and the Ethnic,” is where the majority of readers (especially those reared in rhetorical studies) will feel most at home. Arguing that “federal case law illustrates the ways in which rights discourse continues to restrict the ideographic usage of ‘identity’ in contemporary public discourse,” Grindstaff demonstrates how the rhetorical secret of gay male identity is the source of invention for legal arguments in respect to “essentialism” and “ethnicity” (pp. 58–59). In the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* sodomy case, for example, arguments for the defendants were based on two complementary premises representing essentialism and ethnicity respectively: “(1) sexual identity must be constructed as ‘private’ rather than public; and (2) sexual identity . . . must constitute a coherent and immutable social classification rather than a contingent identity” (p. 62). Based on these premises, Grindstaff shows how the defense offered two related claims that were combined under the right to privacy: first, the act of sodomy—which the state made public—was defended as a private act that constitutes one’s prior gay essence; second, Texas’ anti-sodomy statute discriminated against a protected “suspect class” or social identity. “Discursively speaking,” concludes Grindstaff, “the act of sodomy discloses homosexual identity; yet, paradoxically, in the material world of sexual conduct, anyone can commit the act of sodomy without expressing a specific sexual orientation” (p. 65). Nevertheless, this and similar court cases show how—at least

in the legal domain—state recognition as a social class worthy of protection (or persecution) paradoxically requires the publicity of presumably private acts.

Subsequent chapters turn on the same, twisted secret/disclosure logic of publicity. Although he is careful to note the pragmatic necessity of essentialist and ethnic appeals, in the fourth chapter, “Experiencing the Erotic,” Grindstaff shows how some in the queer community have moved toward “de-eroticization as a political strategy,” a kind of suburbanization of gayness in ways that remain trapped in the “predominant essentialist and ethnicity models of LGBT politics” (p. 100). Michelangelo Signorile’s *Life Outside* is an exemplar argument for the privatization of homoeroticism that reinscribes a stifling ideology of monogamy: by giving up on the spectacle of homoeroticism and retreating to committed, life-long relationships, gay men will achieve widespread social respectability. Against this trend, beginning in Chapter 4 and continuing until the completion of the book, Grindstaff stridently advocates a public eroticism guided by an ethic of fluidity that “calls the practice of sexual subjection itself into question” (p. 112). Such an ethic is committed to the open-ended, collective negotiation of sexual identity in public: “Reducing sexual identity to notions of private personhood, we forget that gay male identity is primarily forged in public through a sense of collectivity” (p. 123). The collective mutability of identity is advanced as a sort of ontological foundation for a queer politics of possibility, and thus an ever-(be)coming queer body politic. In distinction from those who advocate for “equality” by taking to the streets and pushing for legal gay marriage, Grindstaff warns that the claiming of “rights and social privilege” is based on a kind of heteronormative ontology that trends toward individualization and privatization. In this respect, one would be tempted to think that “coming out” as an obvious form of publicity is the most direct route to political and social resistance.

Not so, answers Grindstaff in the fifth chapter. Such a temptation risks falling into the trap of the rhetorical secret, “liberation” being one of the chief pleasures of disclosure. Returning to the work of both Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari, in “Coming Out as Contagious Discourse” Grindstaff carefully details how heteronormativity functions to privatize desire “as the domain of the individual subject,” thereby sapping the strength of desiring collectivity in the language of a promised yet impossible liberation. For coming out to function immanently, the secret must be reconceptualized not in terms of content (e.g., “I contain an innermost gay essence that must be unleashed!”) but in terms of an “event without borders, without an identity” such that “we become-secrets” in the process of “becoming-homosexual” (pp. 136–140). At this juncture in the book the author moves into a Deleuzian argot that, admittedly, is beyond the horizon of this reviewer’s theoretical background. Fortunately, Grindstaff concludes the book with an example of what “becoming-homosexual” means, a close reading of an erotic story that attempts to perform—as opposed to explain (away)—the Deleuzian secret as fluidity and event, an ineffable encounter of becoming-homosexual with “no face, no subject” (p. 147). By way of teasing, I will not recount the reading but rather urge readers to succumb to purchasing the book to get the juicy bits for themselves.

If there is anything in *Rhetorical Secrets* to quibble with, it is Grindstaff's deliberate avoidance of the psychoanalytic literature that underwrites queer theory and the work of many thinkers who were consulted (e.g., Butler, Irigaray, even Deleuze and Guattari), and the author's sweeping dismissals of psychoanalysis as a whole (e.g., pp. 83, 135). One of Grindstaff's major claims, that homosexual male identity is a public production in a private disguise, is persuasive and made with ample evidence. However, at times this point seems to banish all interiors as false "private" domains with one stroke; significant interiors such as the unconscious, which would be the interiorized exteriority in which the rhetorical secret does its ideological identity-work, are simply banished. Nevertheless, taken on its own terms, *Rhetorical Secrets* does advance a theory of desire that many readers will find sufficient for the claims made in the name of collective and individual eroticism beyond the narrow confines of the private bedroom.

Finally, as I've noted throughout, another issue that some readers will have trouble with is Grindstaff's own public desiring, which occasionally takes the form of first-person narratives and descriptions. An understanding of the central, guiding concept of the book's invention—as well as the suggested end of reading as such—helps to explain the (un)intended effect of Grindstaff's performative prose: *jouissance* (pp. 31–32). *Jouissance* is a French concept that is sometimes translated as "enjoyment" or "bliss," although it is perhaps best understood as painful pleasure, an enjoyment that transcends the body's optimum horizon of intelligibility (in French the term also has connotations of orgasm). The distinctive thing about *jouissance* is that it is (mis)perceived as a wholly individualized experience; it is someone getting off, as Bruce Fink once put it, "by any means necessary." We want *jouissance* for ourselves, but we cringe when we see the *jouissance* of others. From an external advantage betokened by "the Cringe," watching or reading about someone getting off suggests *jouissance* is a narcissistic event; however, it actually represents a flight from self-consciousness, identity, subjection, and so on, functioning at some level as a disturbing reminder to the cringing voyeur of the contingency and precariousness of Self. The Cringe is an embodied recognition of oneself in another's enjoyment, as well as a confrontation with one's subjectivity as a sort of accident devoid of some foundational essence.

Unquestionably, it is also in respect to *jouissance* that I opened this review with the example of the cum-shot, which some might argue is a ruse for my own unconscious desiring. The cum-shot marks what some readers would suggest is transgressive enjoyment at their expense (e.g., I enjoy, you Cringe; technically, however, I am not self-conscious of my enjoyment, and consequently the transgression is better described as a more mindful pleasure). Similarly, I would suggest one's initial encounter with Grindstaff's *Rhetorical Secrets* may invite this feeling, for at first blush one might worry that the author is getting off on writing pornography at the reader's expense. This initial Cringe is important, because Grindstaff argues it is a symptom of the ideological matrix that continuously and dynamically keeps the rhetorical secret of gay male identity in the closet, out of sight for all to see. Isn't such a reaction analogous to what the homophobic say about gay pride parades? "What you do in

your own bedroom is your own business, but don't parade it down Main Street!" Isn't the Cringe how the "straight" typically respond to gay publicity in order to continue the privatization of desiring?

By publicizing his own desire—and, if Grindstaff's argument is right, how could he not?—it is clear by the end of the book that what the author is calling for is an understanding that moves beyond the Cringe or the blind celebration of liberation as reactions to another's enjoyment, a politics of collective coming together, and a continuous deferral of judgment in respect to identity. Grindstaff calls for a common openness to the protean and mobile nature of human desiring as a collective and a community. In this respect, for one to read "gay male identity" as the ultimate focus of the book for pragmatic reasons (as Grindstaff claims; p. 2)—or simply because of masculine bias—is paradoxically parochial, for in many ways the study successfully moves beyond it: the rhetorical secret concerns public subjects in general, and the way in which we come to social identities through the processes of disclosure and concealment. Publicity is the announcement that "I'm coming out into a public," the assumed "inside" thus becoming any previously secret thing. Hence *Rhetorical Secrets* is a book that explicates one of the central interests of rhetoric, the formation and maintenance of a public and its subjects, but this explication is unique because it describes this process as a sensual, desire-charged, and desire-producing dynamic. The late Edwin Black once observed that the "rhetorical forms of secrecy and disclosure" are important because they "reflect the ways in which people assimilate themselves to those two sovereign antonymies [*sic*], public and private" (Black, 1988, p. 149). Grindstaff's *Rhetorical Secrets* is a marvelous explication of these ways, but with one difference: insofar as interiors are merely enfoldments of the exterior, the public and the private turn out to be two distorted sides of the same Möbius strip of becoming.

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