

## **Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality and Women's Experience of Modern War, 1914-18**

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'We have to produce something that doesn't yet exist and of which we can have no idea of what it will be'. This quotation from Michel Foucault's *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988*, cited in the epilogue to *Disturbing Practices*, establishes the fundamental challenge positioned at the heart of these projects: the production of histories that uncover experiences of identity from the past that have no contemporary translations (p. 195). Tellingly, it is within areas of human history that may, at first, seem most 'unknowable' where some of the discipline's most exciting work is emerging (for example, histories of emotions and histories of pain). *Disturbing Practices*' endeavours to explore histories of sexuality, many of which are positioned on the cusp of comprehension, is testament of the need to dedicate effort to these tricky fields rather than simply discount them because of their lack of clarity and ambiguity.

Taking on this challenge is Laura Doan, professor of cultural history and sexuality studies at the University of Manchester. Doan is an established figure in the field of gender, sex and sexuality histories, best known for her 2001 work *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*.<sup>(1)</sup> In her most recent work, Doan returns to several of the issues first discussed in *Fashioning Sapphism*, and her 2006 article 'Topsy-turvydom: gender inversion, sapphism and the Great War'.<sup>(2)</sup> With this reconsideration of past arguments, Doan makes the pleasingly sincere admission that historians, like the subjects that they discuss, can change their views with the passage of time.

The book's preface presents a concise introduction to Doan's project, comparing the process of piecing-together queer histories to grasping feathers caught in the wind (pp. x–xi). This image of our historian grabbing at feathers as they are caught in a breeze is an oddly poetic start to a work that quickly abandons this stylistic flourish, yet it does serve as a potent metaphor for the haphazard nature of Doan's project and other attempts to write queer histories.

Doan's contribution to the field is of primary interest to those impassioned by the history of sexuality and the methodologies behind these practices. However, the book's reach goes further and is undeniably of value to all historians engaged in thinking about how they 'do' history. Historians writing today should regard Doan's work as a call to arms, exciting us to ask new questions about what we want to discover by looking

at the past and challenging *apriori* assumptions that continue within the discipline. The book's back cover states, 'For decades, the history of sexuality has been a multidisciplinary project serving competing agendas'. These 'competing agendas' are foregrounded in Doan's work, where she explores the uses (and abuses) of histories of sexuality while promoting her own critical account of the direction she feels the discipline should take.

An intent to 'disturb', as indicated by the work's title, suggests discontent with the present state of affairs. Doan certainly has many criticisms of how past histories have been written, yet her handling of these failings is measured and a paradigm of scholarly writing. Respectfully, she cites problems inherent in the linking of the past and present, as well as the ongoing problem of truth claims and illusions of empiricism. Following identification of these problems, Doan then sets out to offer a remedy. However, this remedying of the past and presentation of a new direction for studies is not adversarial. Instead, she rightfully notes the value of these stories for many people, both historians and non-historians, who seek to make sense of the present through an excavation of the past.

Careful handling of these differences is one of *Disturbing Practices*' strengths. She acknowledges how these approaches have been popularised and the history of sexuality's historiographical links to genealogical projects (in which the present serves as a starting point for a historical project). Though these projects can take many forms, from family histories to methods followed by Foucault, genealogies charting histories of sexuality, Doan claims, can never be conditioned to become critical histories, as their starting point will always remain as the 'contemporary homosexual' (p. 84).

Addressing the problems present in previous approaches to histories of sexuality, Doan's queer critical history works outside the framework of connections and disconnections, in which there is no intention to produce a past that is necessarily usable by the present (p. 61). Doan asks us to reconsider how historians use the past. Even though it is made clear that queer critical history does not offer the promise of community feelings, and instead seeks to expose structures of knowing including fashions of thinking that have now since disappeared, this enlightened approach to the history of sexuality is perhaps the necessary next step in attempts to write part of the past.

Doan's intention is to erect a bridge between history and queer theory. This, it is explained, can be achieved through the linking of queer theory/history and critical theory/history. Doan's use of queer as a verb rather than a noun or adjective, being used as a means to disrupt rather than explain, is fundamental to how this can be achieved. Rather than look to the past for examples of queer men and women or queer practices, queer should become a tool at the historian's disposal – a new form to attack the past.

As one would expect in a study seeking to make sense of a past in which concepts of identity and being existed specific to the time and not easily translated into 21st-century expression, there are moments where the line of argument appears foggy. This is not a criticism and must be expected in a book directed at addressing such bold subject matter and Doan makes a valiant effort throughout to steer her argument through concepts that can be unexpected and unknown.

After navigating the reader through the theoretical and historiographical sections of the book, Doan's queer critical history is then applied to historical examples. The structural arrangement of the book is one of its strengths: dividing itself into two parts, the first half addressing historiographical and theoretical debates ('The practice of sexual history'), and the second half introducing historical case studies to which these methods can be applied ('Practicing sexual history'). This structure simplifies the reader's task of digesting challenging concepts and is an approach that should be replicated by other historians wishing to explain complex thoughts simply.

In the second section of the work, Doan returns to her better-known terrain of source materials and studies of women's work experiences, friendships and communities during the First World War. Chapter three looks at previously published research to ask how gender would have been understood and discussed at the time and

the drawbacks of categorisation. Classification problems emerge as a dominant concern in this second section. It is argued that this tendency to classify is a contemporary desire that closes down many possible directions for intellectual inquiry; a sentiment, as identified by Doan, which echoes the work of Joan Wallach Scott and her description of categories as 'empty'.<sup>(3)</sup> Many of the women discussed by Doan were not classified by others or did not self-classify themselves at the time, even when their bodies served as sites and situations for debate. Underpinning this taxonomical dilemma is the revelation that in the early 20th century most people, beyond certain intellectual circles, did not 'discuss' sexuality. The 'love that dare not speak its name' was not simply the effect of prudishness but instead indicative of concepts not in common, public discourse. Chapters four and five discuss Violet Douglas-Pennant, former head of the Women's Royal Air Force who was the subject of rumours that eventually lead to her dismissal in 1918, and Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm who worked as drivers and nurses during the First World War.

A six-month gap exists between my first reading of *Disturbing Practices* and sitting down to write this review and I feel that this fermentation period has been useful in allowing me to fully appreciate the gravitas of Doan's undertaking. Written at the top of my notes was the question, 'Does *Disturbing Practices* offer a new approach to histories of gender, sex and sexuality?' The extent to which arguments put forward in the book are 'new' is perhaps debatable, yet where Doan excels is bringing together these strands of thought, explaining them succinctly and arranging them into a new, overarching approach to studies of the past that historians cannot ignore.

Equally of interest is Doan's call for queer studies to explore the 'normal' – why, she asks, has the focus of the history of sexuality generally been focussed upon bodies that performed actions and behaviours deemed unconventional at the time? This observation is astute yet would have been strengthened, and would have complemented Doan's overall argument, if the book included more examples pertaining to this belief. Though it was admittedly not Doan's intention and the reasons behind their inclusion are clear, studies of women workers in the First World War do not serve as ideal examples through which to promote the use of queer history to study the 'normal'.

As a researcher working in the field of the history of sexuality, I have already found myself asking how *Disturbing Practices* informs my own work. Though my research is focussed on the actions and behaviours of 'heterosexual' men in 1940s London, the same methodological questions, as outlined by *Disturbing Practices*, apply. This is what Doan intended from the work, it is not a study of the First World War, nor is it an attack on what has come before it; instead Doan offers a clear and confident direction for how histories of sexuality could, and in her opinion should, develop.

## Notes

1. Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York, NY, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Laura Doan, 'Topsy-turvydom: gender inversion, sapphism, and the Great War', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12, 4 (2006), 517–42.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Joan Wallach Scott, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis?', *Feminism and History* (New York, NY, 1996), p. 174.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/74790>