Sex, Time and Place: Queer Histories of London c.1850 to the Present

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The age of lesbian and gay, in which those were the dominant terms for homoeroticism and other things that seemed (sometimes arbitrarily) to be related to it, appears to be over. Whereas many people used to describe themselves in this way, many (at least in Northwestern Europe, Scandinavia, and America's coastal cities) now prefer one or more letters out of the descriptor LBTQIA+, or to use terms that relate primarily to gender, such as 'non-binary' or trans. 'Gay', not to mention lesbian, has never been less fashionable. In these relatively small spaces of Europe and America, this is the age of queer. That term began in the early 1990s as a way of appropriating and disarming a perjorative label, and was attached initially to in-your-face types of activism around AIDs and civil-legal rights. In that sense it was more of an aggressively expressed gay/lesbian identity and it is often used merely as a synonym for the older terms gay/lesbian. Now though, queer (at least adjectivally speaking) is the umbrella term for the alphabetic miasma that used to demarcate 'sexual identity' – a term that now seems almost quaintly antiquated. It also aims to be a critical method, a deconstructive enterprise that seeks to undo or defamiliarize categories and identities often taken as self-evident, such as the difference between hetero and homo, man and woman. Instead, queer resists definition, preferring to open up a space of possibility. In that sense it aims to be a sort of general theory of identity, a universal solvent applied to anything (not only sexuality) that claims or appears to be fixed, knowable, total. Finally, queer is a (rather exhausting) way of being, one that rejects such stable identities, and sees itself as constantly shifting and changing in time and space. It is a self constantly in the process of self-making. A number of histories have been written using these ideas, and have broken down the idea that sexual experience in the past can be subsumed under the cultural identities that we might find familiar from the present. The queer past (just like the queer present) is a world of indeterminacy, flux, constant movement. So we know what queer is, or do we?

Many of the contributors to this volume try and grapple with the elusive quality of queer. For the co-editor Simon Avery queer is both 'a series of approaches and politics to do with sexuality, desire and intimacy which trouble and disrupt orthodoxies and categories, particularly those which are "normalized" by heteropatriarchy, or increasingly, "homonormativity"', and a project that aims 'to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize ... heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are

(in)formed by them and that (in)form them'. It should also be considered in its older sense of odd, strange, eccentric. It represents a commitment to 'subversive and transgressive practices'.

Co-editor Katherine Graham uses it as an umbrella term for 'LGBTQ+' identities, but also for those who do not identify with any of these letters, as well as people 'for whom such a taxonomy is not possible due to their historically contingent socio-cultural position'. She approvingly quotes the doyenne of queer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who defined it as 'the effect produced when an attempt at monolithic signification fails – or when stable identity categories fail'. According to Graham, not all the contributors to the volume use queer in this way, but all of them do 'understand their subjects as occupying a position (in relation to their sexuality and/or gender and/or desire) that refuses, or eschews, the "normal".' So queer refers both to those who identify with sexual identity categories, and to those who don't. It is associated with homoerotic desires and acts, except when it is resisting homonormativity, when it might not be.

But queer might not even be about sexuality at all. This is suggested in Emma Spruce's chapter on lesbian and gay 'progress narratives' and how they construct 'backward' places on local and global maps (Africa, Brixton) where gay rights are unrecognised or the subject of conflict. For Spruce, 'homosexual identities and practices can also perpetuate normativity'. Equally, queer does not even have to be about sexuality, but is a form of universal critique. It is most usefully deployed 'as a catalyst to destabilize orthodox correlations of research question and analytical site', to foreground the fact that 'LGBT sexualities' are not radical (or not radical enough) and therefore can function 'as a site through which global patterns of inequality are sustained, with material and localized effects'. Lesbians and gays can be racist, or used politically to racist ends, as anyone who has observed Dutch politics in recent years will attest. In Spruce's reading, queer retains the radical potential of sexual dissidence only by distancing itself from it.

Kayte Stokoe, in her chapter on Drag Kings (women doing male-impersonator drag acts) in contemporary London, agrees that 'LGBTQIA practices' are not necessarily radical, but also wants to employ queer to 'gesture towards stances of fluidity, collectivity and anti-normativity, both within and outside the context of LGBTQIA practices'. The meaning of queer is ever-changing, subject to 'temporal and cultural shifts, and does not refer monolithically to a single identity or practice'. Silvia Antosa, writing about the 19th-century Cannibal Club, follows Sedgwick in seeing queer as an open mesh of possibilities 'enabled by non-normative and multiple understandings and practices of gender and sexuality', but presumably includes the elite (heterosexual) literateurs of that Club within that. Queer also includes analysis of race, ethnicity and nationality and how they intersect with sexual ideas, acts and identities.

Bart Eeckhout's chapter on Alan Hollinghurst's novels (which are definitely 'gay', set as they are in the 1980s, the golden age of gay), makes a similar move. Queer is not just about 'non-normative sexualities' but 'the fundamental uncontainability' of sexual desire in general, as well as 'the impossibility of translating such desires into identities that may be fixed and categorized'. Marco Venturi, in describing how Grindr and other hookup apps have moved gay life from the streets and bars to a digital space that is as invisible as any closet, situates queer as the product of the 'queer nation/Outrage' activism of the 1990s, but says that queer now means 'any self-identified non-normative expression of sexual identity (be it gay, lesbian, bi, trans, or straight)'. Contrary to the rest of the authors here, Venturi prefers gay as a term, as it is 'more widespread'. The contributors I haven't mentioned in this summary mostly either agree with some variant of these approaches, or ignore such conundrums altogether, mostly assuming that queer is the same as gay and lesbian.

To summarize the state of queer: it is about homoeroticism, though not always (or even); it is about sexuality, though again not always; it is about those who express a sexual or gender identity as well as those who refuse it. It is also about those who can't be identified in this way. It is often synonymous with gay and lesbian, but can also be used to critique gay and lesbian identities as monolithic and normalizing. It is a constantly changing universal critique that undermines all norms.

Other than the editors' three chapters, there are 13 contributions in the book, and in fact they are mostly

about homoerotic desires, identities, representations, and ‘practices’, which is itself a commentary on the practical difficulty of queer when understood as a historical method or universal critique that aims to include (or critique) all sorts of different kinds of identity at once. Still, the contributors give it a good go. Matt Cook (seeing queer as synonymous with gay men) discusses how shadows of AIDs fell on gay men and their metropolitan spaces, while Emma Spruce ticks off mainstream gays and lesbians for indulging in crypto-racist notions of progress, and thereby constructing the world as a racially-charged map of prejudiced London boroughs. Paulina Palmer examines the queer world of literary *pasticheur* Sarah Waters and the ways in which her protagonists both court and resist sexual identities. Kayte Stokoe wonders why Drag Kings are not more popular in the capital, concluding that they might be too queer for London’s queers. Gemma Romain and Caroline Bressey examine the career of West Indian writer Claude McKay in inter-war London, showing his difficulties with the racial politics of white homosexuals (who disdained his colour), as well as with the prejudices of the political left, who didn’t like his sexuality. Lesley Hall re-examines the work of the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology on homosexuality, while Silvia Antosa sees the Cannibal Club of Richard Monckton-Milnes, Algernon Swinburne and Richard Burton as an intersection of sexual, racial and colonial preoccupations. Dominic Janes suggests some of the ways in which the work of Francis Bacon may have been informed by his knowledge of queer spaces and places, and of the ways in which they were policed and represented in police photography. In one of the better and more archivally-aware chapters (the two things are probably related) Carolyn Conroy examines the life of the later Pre-Raphaelite painter Simeon Solomon. He was arrested for having sex in a urinal in 1873 and according to legend, degenerated into alcoholism and vagrancy. Conroy resurrects Solomon’s post-arrest reputation, showing not only that he did not completely fall victim to drink, but in fact gloried in his association with low life (which was often read by journalists as sexually other) in St Giles.

Bart Eeckhout shows how Alan Hollinghurst’s novels of gay London life start off by taking gayness to be a natural condition rather than something to discuss in itself, and in the process queered the metropolitan novel, placing homoeroticism at its heart. In probably the stand-out chapter, Anne Witchard investigates the lesbian cafe and club scene in inter-war Soho, broadening out the usual history of that period from the *Well of Loneliness* and also showing how lesbianism was imbricated in the bohemianism and low life of clubs like the Cave of the Golden Calf. In another fine chapter, Marco Venturi looks at the ways gay men interact with social media and dating apps like Grindr or GayRomeo. These are eminently queer spaces, in which married men (married, that is, to women), self-identified gays, and others mingle. The result, Venturi argues, is not always good, as these sites encourage the replication of a certain normativity expressed in the minute specification of tastes (‘no fatties’, ‘no Asians’ etc). That, Venturi says, tends to prioritise ‘straight-acting’ and to exclude not only ethnic otherness but also campness, effeminacy and gender queerness. Social media is one of the key drivers of the ‘alphabetisation’ of sexuality, and its balkanisation into highly specific and individualised niches. All is personal and nothing is social or still less political. By taking the market for gay venues, social media also turns the gay bits of Soho into a more touristic ‘heritage’ brand (as seen also by the campaign to make the historic gay venue the Royal Vauxhall Tavern a listed building). In contrast, Sam McBean says that Facebook can actually be used to think about queer history especially through the archiving of photographs by the American artist Christa Holka. In particular, people were and are keen to record their own experience of ‘queer London’ or have it recorded in this way.

Although sold as a set of ‘queer histories’, the authors are rarely historians per se and the book is an eclectic mixture of disciplines, mainly literary or cultural studies and sociology. It also shows the kaleidoscopic effect of queer as a method, and not always in a good sense. One of the ironies of queer is that it started as deconstructive project, aiming to break down seemingly self-evident binaries and categories, but in practice it does so to re-install new enemies such as ‘normality’, homonormativity, and in some cases lesbian and gay, against which seemingly monolithic and necessary foes it defines itself. No doubt that is queer too. Many of the chapters here ignore such paradoxes, and are content to work within usual historical methods and paradigms, whereas others want to foreground their theoretical commitments and radical claims. Queer – taken as a method – can be both, of course. But the problem is that it can be all sorts of other things as well. You could say that queer is the ideal conceptual tool to mark an age of indeterminacy and hyper-individualism driven by digital technology. In that sense it is mainly interesting not as a theoretical project,

but in the way it marks a wider breakdown in sexual categories and labels which have held sway for quite a long time. That might be a good thing, or it might not. In general, the volume worries away at the conceptual difficulties and downright confusions of queer as a method, without really reaching any sort of conclusions about it, or what might be done about them. How queer.

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