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978-0-521-59101-0 - Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference

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Excerpt

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PART I

*Queer cultural studies of
history*

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Metanarrative and gay identity

An exclusive focus on the emergence of *the* lesbian or gay identity skews our understanding of the complexity of homosexual experiences.

(Susan K. Cahn)¹

Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Stuart Hall)²

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives . . . Postmodern knowledge . . . refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. (Jean-François Lyotard)³

Very much an “essential” domain of queer discursive practices, history has had persistent and multiple significances in gay and lesbian studies both inside and outside the academy. Yet we can also discern vital and productive engagements with the past in the larger cultural and political work of lesbian and gay communities. Recurrent fascination with various aspects of ancient Greek culture, biographies of famous homosexuals from the past, and a recovery of Native American *berdache* and other third-gender traditions, as much as the yearly celebrations of the Stonewall riots, the circulation of images and texts of the Harlem Renaissance, lesbian reclamations of pre-Stonewall butch-femme relationships, and the redeployment of the pink – and increasingly black – triangle as a symbol of defiance of, rather than acquiescence to, the historical and contemporary oppression of gay men and lesbians, to offer just a few relatively familiar examples, permeate the themes and styles of gay and lesbian self-representations.⁴

This book returns to the shared point of departure of these disparate, uneven, and at times contradictory projects traversing the various terrains of lesbian and gay studies and communities – their insistent engagement with history. Yet, rather than doing so to undertake a project of historical reconstruction, I return to this complex site to begin a critical study of

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queer fictions of the past as important social/cultural texts in the articulation of lesbian and gay identities and differences. As historians Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey suggest in their introduction to an anthology of articles on “reclaiming the gay and lesbian past,” “some of the most important issues facing, agitating, and sometimes dividing [gay and lesbian communities] today, personally and collectively, are best addressed historically.”⁵ In addition to its critical, descriptive, explanatory, and strategic uses, however, history also helps circumvent the censorship, denial, and amnesia that have continued to inform so much of lesbian and gay existence. Public celebrations such as the commemorations of the Stonewall riots, the annual Harvey Milk memorial march in San Francisco, and various AIDS-related memory projects such as the Names Project Quilt provide gay men and lesbians with powerful collective forms of historical recollection that animate the present in a variety of complex ways. In other words, though the study of gay and lesbian history provides cogent ways of addressing questions of identity, politics, community, and difference, historical events and memories of them also continue to imbue the present with meaning and give the past a surplus of signification that is itself in need of critical analysis.

In the chapters that follow, I will argue that lesbians and gay men, individually and collectively, have a relationship to history that is not only complex but also contradictory. In making that proposal and addressing its implications for queer historical subjects, I will read past histories to look at how some of the many cultural claims, public celebrations, and political debates that traverse, animate, and divide gay and lesbian communities do not merely reference the past but are actually strongly motivated by historical argument. The importance of history to gay men and lesbians goes beyond the lessons to be learned from the events of the past to include the meanings generated through retellings of those events and the agency those meanings carry in the present. Lesbian and gay historical self-representations – queer fictions of the past – help construct, maintain, and contest identities – queer fictions of the present. For this reason, we need to look at how the images of the gay and lesbian past circulating among us animate the present and to read lesbian and gay historical self-representations as sites of ongoing hermeneutic and political struggle in the formation of new social subjects and new cultural possibilities. Thus, while *Queer fictions of the past* reiterates the value of history as a means to address a range of pressing issues confronting lesbian and gay communities, it also reevaluates the terms of that assertion.

Before proceeding along the double trajectory of this book’s principal argument, however, I need to look closely at an important generation of

gay and lesbian historical scholarship that has recounted the story of the modern homosexual and the rise of a specifically gay identity. In this chapter, I use this complex and contradictory relationship to history to rethink “the making of the modern homosexual” from a position of relative skepticism towards such narratives that has been opened up by the general political, cultural, and theoretical projects of postmodernism.⁶

Over the past decade and a half, numerous historical, sociological, and theoretical studies have explored the emergence of lesbian and gay identities, subcultures, communities, and politics.⁷ The historicizing project of this generation of research has revealed not only the discontinuities between cultural conceptions of homosexuality across time and space but also the ways in which the various sustained attempts to gain knowledge of sexuality are themselves constitutive of that bodily domain of pleasure, power, and personal identity now regarded as sexuality. While enabling a more careful and specified diachronic analysis of the development of, on the one hand, heterosexist and homophobic institutions of domination and, on the other, celebratory and resistant gay and lesbian cultural practices, these texts have in turn tended to reify certain current conceptions of homosexuality which are unified and stabilized by contrasting them to those of an utterly different past. That is, they have created categories of bodily, psychic, social, and political experience on either side of this divide between past and present that are not only fundamentally different from each other but are also fundamentally similar to themselves, and they have constructed coherence, cohesion, and stability against the multiply fractured subject positions that constitute the lives of lesbian and gay individuals. Although social constructionist theory is dynamic and promising in relationship to understanding both the past and the present, these studies of the emergence of lesbian and gay identity have been relatively unsuccessful at recognizing race, gender, and class (among other) antagonisms “within” that identity. In foregrounding diachronic or historical ruptures between social constructions of “homosexuality,” these related projects have underemphasized the synchronic or contemporary ruptures between social constructions of homosexuality and their own specific histories, rife with contradictions of their own. Moreover, the developmental model of history on which these accounts are based paradoxically unifies the past histories of “gay identity,” a process that their genealogical strategy seemingly attempts to resist.

Though varying in the emphasis they place on specific historical processes, social structures, crystallizing events, and public and private discourses,

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these arguments agree that a distinctive homosexual identity has emerged only in the last century or so; they use this argument of the comparatively recent formation of a homosexual identity as an expression of individual desire within the available discourses in order to explain the emergence of gay and lesbian subcultures, communities, and social movements in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere at different moments in the twentieth century. As John D’Emilio has pointed out in a survey of research on gay history, however, “of all national histories being investigated, that of the United States most clearly confirms the argument of [Jeffrey] Weeks and [Michel] Foucault concerning the emergence of a distinctive gay identity.”⁸ For this reason, both the analysis and the critique that follow are decidedly and purposefully US-centered.

In these arguments, several factors stand out among the various conditions that enabled the existence of gay and lesbian worlds, especially the growth of industrial capitalism and its attendant impact on kinship and family life, gender roles, urbanization, and ideologies of accumulation, ownership, and individualism. D’Emilio makes this argument most forcefully in his article “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (a force that perhaps reflects the greater latitude for critique afforded by its site of publication). In that essay, D’Emilio “argue[s] that lesbians and gay men have *not* always existed.” Rather “we are a product of” a particular historical period whose “emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism.” Specifically, it is the free labor system “that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay” (p. 102). The growth of capitalism and the spread of wage labor, D’Emilio and others argue, transformed the structure, functions, and relationships of family life. Having previously been both a system of consumption and a system of household production, the family began to lose its economic self-sufficiency by the nineteenth century when men and women became increasingly involved in and dependent on the capitalist free labor system. (Of course, this monolithic version of the “family” is also highly contested and reiterates the long-existing ideology of the yeoman farmer in America which marginalizes such central familial economic forms as slave families, the white plantation economies dependent on the slave-labor system, and the US government’s attempt to construct patriarchal, land-owning Native American nuclear families with the implementation of the General Allotment Act in 1877.) This change effected a shift in the significance of the family away from a materially productive institution towards an affective unit which brought with it changes in the meaning of sexual relations between men and women. As D’Emilio points out, whereas offspring had once been necessary contributors to the household economy, with the

growth of wage labor and the socialization of production “it became possible to release sexuality from the ‘imperative’ to procreate” (p. 104). Within this new set of experiences, heterosexual expression gradually began to be conceived of as a way to achieve intimacy, happiness, and pleasure rather than substantially and perhaps most importantly as a (re)productive act. By removing the productive aspect from the household economy and fostering a separation of (hetero)sexuality from procreation, capitalism, D’Emilio contends, made it possible for “some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex” (p. 104) and “survive beyond the confines of the family” (p. 105).

These new possibilities for personal life, however, were inscribed with and through highly salient marks of difference. In her article “Patriarchy, Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution,” Ann Ferguson focuses directly on the question of how these new and changing economic possibilities affected the life choices available to and pursued by women. Ferguson also stresses the importance of “nineteenth-century industrial capitalism . . . for women [in particular] in that it eventually weakened the patriarchal power of fathers and sons.” While “this relative gain in freedom was not an instant effect of capitalism,” she argues, not only did the “acquisition of an income g[i]ve women new options” but so too did “commercial capital’s growth [spur] the growth of urban areas, which in turn gave feminist and deviant women the possibility of escaping the confines of rigidly traditional, patriarchal farm communities for an independent, if often impoverished, life in the cities” (p. 156). Ferguson’s attention to the particular place of women in the economy points to a set of ruptures across gay and lesbian identities that undermine the logic of these theoretical accounts. I will return to these problems at the end of this chapter.

These accounts of a specifically “gay identity” contrasted to past constructions of homosexuality emphasize and reinterpret broad-based transformations in the social structure that are part of a much longer, much larger process of modernization, and they provide focused discussions of the changes both in such “personal” aspects of life as sexuality, gender, identity, and love and such “public” areas as cities, the economy, medicine, and culture. In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, an approving reappraisal of “the experience of modernity,” Marshall Berman identifies these less specified processes and posits a “truth” about modernity that anticipates the problems of the gay identity thesis. “Modern environments and experiences,” Berman proclaims in an unironic hyperbole, “cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind.”⁹

Ultimately, then, on Berman's analysis, *modernity is indifferent to difference*. The experience of modernity, however, is not marked solely by vastly new and profound changes in social organization and material forces carrying out their changes on an impersonal society and unwitting, passive humans. The "world-historical processes" of change have also enabled, even required, a wide range of cultural responses. These cultural responses, which Berman identifies as "modernism," consist of "an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom [of modern life] and make it their own" (p. 16).

Several points in Berman's reconstructed story of the interrelated projects of modernization, modernism, and modernity parallel the specific accounts of gay and lesbian identity formation in social constructionist historical-theoretical work. The most direct link between Berman's analysis and the arguments of this gay and lesbian research is "the process of economic and social development [which] generates new modes of self-development, ideal for men and women who can grow into the emerging world" (p. 66). Both arguments also focus on the vast rural-to-urban migration that has caused as well as emerged from large-scale social disruption over the past 200 years. The individual move from the "closed social system[s]" (p. 66) of small communities to the unrealized urban promise of "great cities" (p. 59), Berman argues, has been motivated by the desire for "action, adventure, an environment in which [one] can be . . . free to act, freely active (p. 66). A related feature of this urban promise, both for Berman's view of modernity as an undifferentiated project and for the more focused histories of gay identity formation as an aspect of modernity, is the change in consciousness effected by the collapse of "order and complete content" that had been provided by small-town "little worlds" (p. 55). Urban environments, Berman argues as do gay historians, have afforded anonymity through which one can escape "the surveillance of family, neighbors, priests . . . all the suffocating pressures of the closed small-town world" (p. 54).

In part the collective cultural projects of modernism, as Berman sees them, promise the security of individual development and a stable self-identity in "the maelstrom" of an ever-changing world. For many gay men and lesbians, coming out of the closet has reflected these twin desires and has played a decisive role in the politicization of homosexuality since Stonewall. As a powerful way to develop and claim "who we really are," coming out meets the modernist promise of stability in a world characterized by change. However, the security of a stable, "real" gay or lesbian self

is an illusion produced through the strong personal and political value invested in the process of coming out.¹⁰ In addition to fostering this illusory personal safety, coming out contributes to the notion of a stable, unified, uncontradicted “community” and suggests a larger emergence of “gay identity” which reconstructs the historical past around modernist criteria of authenticity and development. As Jeffrey Weeks explains:

“Coming out” is usually seen as a personal process, the acceptance, and public demonstration, of the validity of one’s homosexuality. But it can also be seen as an historic process, the gradual emergence and articulation of a homosexual identity and public presence.¹¹

By emphasizing the fundamental structural reorganization of society associated with the rise of capitalist economies as a grand, universalizing historical process, this generation of research on homosexuality has obscured recognition of effective and meaningful difference within that overarching process of change. Eve Sedgwick has rightly pointed out that “these historical projects . . . still risk reinforcing a dangerous consensus of knowingness about the genuinely *unknown*, more than vestigially contradictory structurings of contemporary experience.” This generation of research, she argues, has “counterpos[ed] against the alterity of the past a relatively unified homosexuality that ‘we’ *do* ‘know today.’”¹² Additionally, however, these texts have counterposed against the alterity – the difference, the newness – of current conceptions of homosexuality a relatively unified past that “they” *did* “know then.” The paradigm of “the making of the modern homosexual” denies or subsumes under the privileged sign of gay identity whatever antecedent forms of difference might have existed; that is, within the logic of these accounts, these differences are just as indifferent in the historical development of gay and lesbian identities as the differences dismissed by Berman are to modernity itself.

I want to suggest, however, that we begin thinking about “the making of the modern homosexual” not as a “fact” but as an argument, fundamentally as a narrative with serious implications for addressing issues historically. Rather than simply describing an historical process, these accounts of the past themselves help “make” or “construct” the fiction of the modern homosexual. In this sense, they are themselves part of what Foucault has termed the reverse discourse (curiously, problematically, and inaccurately in the singular) on homosexuality and are themselves agents in the reformulations and contestations of the meanings of homosexuality.¹³ Specifically, we need to regard the “modernist” tendencies within this collective body of research as a rhetorical practice closely allied with those experiences of modernity the work investigates.

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Most importantly, these arguments about gay identity need to be read in relation to Berman's hyperbolic statement on modernity's indifference to geographic, ethnic, class, national, religious, and ideological differences which itself reiterates this very indifference to difference. Berman's framework for ascribing creative agency to the human subjects of modernization does not recognize the ways in which these vital differences inform the "amazing variety of visions and ideas" of the "modernist" cultural projects he champions. In its indifference to difference, the totalizing sweep of modernist histories and cultural theories anchors present identities in a stable, coherent personal and social past (the family, capitalism, cities); overrides, disallows, and denies other experiences; and implicitly grounds conceptions of gay identity within the specific experiences of urban, middle-class white men. For the history of industrialization – the material base of the modernity championed by Berman and the catalyst that propelled the wholesale changes in family life preceding the emergence of urban gay subcultures – has a complex, exploitative "underside" that belies the inevitability of "the real social movement toward economic development" (p. 40), thus problematizing "the cultural ideal of self-development" (p. 40) whose ideological underpinnings are in fact connected to the economic *underdevelopment* of whole populations of people. While these gay history texts recount somewhat different versions of the modernity yielded by modernization, we need to take seriously Berman's reminder that these processes of historical change are connected to, reflected in, *and* addressed by modernist cultural practices. More than simply describing the modernisms of the past, the relationship between modernization and modernism is also reiterated in the historical narratives they recount. As Berman says, they, too, are "visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as objects of modernization" (p. 16).

Within these modernist narratives, the cultural and political constructions of gay identity and a social movement are built upon the mutual experience of homosexuality, a mutual experience subject to (eventual) mediation by multiple differences, including those of race, gender, class, and nationality which the ostensible "unity" of modernity cuts across. Jeffrey Escoffier, for instance, makes the following observation about the historical emergence of "difference" within gay and lesbian identity-based political movements (in the early 1980s).

In gay politics not only has the affirmation of shared experience resulted in the consolidation of homosexual differentness, but in the lesbian and gay-male communities' drive for affirmation differences have emerged among the members of both communities that cannot be eradicated.¹⁴