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978-0-521-59907-8 - Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference

Scott Bravmann

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In *Queer fictions of the past*, Scott Bravmann explores the complexity of lesbian and gay engagement with history and considers how historical discourses animate the present. Characterizing historical representations as dynamic conversations between then and now, he demonstrates their powerful role in constructing present identities, differences, politics, and communities. In particular, his is the first book to explore the ways in which lesbians and gay men have used history to define themselves as social, cultural, and political subjects. In his opening chapters, Dr. Bravmann elaborates the theoretical and political stakes of such a project before turning to analyses of how historiography, ancient Greek history, the Stonewall riots, and postmodern historical texts both inform and reflect the race, gender, class and political dimensions to queer subjectivity.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521599078

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First published 1997

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Bravmann, Scott, 1964–

Queer fictions of the past: history, culture, and difference / Scott Bravmann.

p. cm. – (Cambridge cultural social studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 59101 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 59907 5 paperback

1. Fiction – History and criticism. 2. Homosexuality in literature. 3. Literature and history. 4. Identity (Psychology) in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PN3352.H65B73 1997

809'.93353–dc21 96–54613 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-59101-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-59907-8 Paperback

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Preface

This book engages the abiding significance of the past across a range of lesbian and gay discursive practices. Rather than endeavoring to reconstruct any particular historical moment, series of events, or social change, I engage in close readings of rich and varied textual evidence and offer theoretical elaboration to explore the multiple, complex, and inconsistent ways that historical arguments motivate gay and lesbian identities, communities, and politics. Because I believe these diverse practices deserve and need to be taken seriously as social/cultural texts that produce, contest, and destabilize historically contingent fictive identities, I seek to expand what counts as history for gay and lesbian studies. Like much gay and lesbian history writing, however, my argument reiterates the value of historical inquiry as a means of addressing important, often contested and divisive, issues confronting lesbian and gay communities in the present. Yet I also want to reevaluate the terms of that assertion. For that reason, this study refuses to treat “history” as either a stable, completed temporal locus or as a value-free, mimetic representation of the past.

Recent scholarship both in gay and lesbian history and in queer theory has powerfully problematized a wide range of socially constructed and arbitrary regimes of the “normal” and the “natural.” Rather conspicuously, however, these inquiries have not been accompanied by an interest in looking at the discourse of history itself as one such regime. Nonetheless, there are compelling theoretical, epistemological, and political reasons to remain skeptical of academic history writing as has been demonstrated by recent critical theoretical work that has sought to make historiography’s codes of representation as much an object of analysis as an instrument of it. On the one hand, in response to the crisis in historical studies that this work has responded to and helped provoke, the mode of analysis I pursue in this project regards historiography as a culturally privileged system of

signification and rethinks the familiar, confident invocations of history that animate multiple gay and lesbian cultural practices. On the other hand, in light of cogent critiques of both humanist conceptions of subjectivity and of identity politics, I reconsider questions of identity, community, and history from a perspective that acknowledges multiple socially constituted differences among gay and lesbian subjects in order to resist the powerful pull of historical self-representations that gravitate toward “sameness.” In this double sense, then, I recognize the need to develop a project of queer cultural studies of history that focuses on the politics and the poetics of historical discourses – on, in other words, queer fictions of the past.

I begin by tracing the modernist narrative logic of social constructionist historical accounts of gay identity formation. Focusing on the ways this logic elides the multiple differences among gay men and lesbians, the first chapter sets the stage for the theoretical elaboration and the substantive arguments developed in the following chapters. The second chapter articulates the project’s double theoretical approach to what I call queer historical subjects. Drawing on queer, feminist, and cultural theories, I foreground the intractability of identity and difference that make the subjects of gay and lesbian studies – queer historical subjects – problematic. From there, I move in the latter half of that chapter to theoretical and political critiques of historical representation in order to reassess – indeed, to queer – the place of history in gay and lesbian studies.

Developing these two themes through analyses of historical practices, chapters 4, 5, and 6 read past histories to explore specific, albeit large and weighty, instances of gay and lesbian historical imaginations. My treatment of these highly consequential examples as sites of hermeneutic and political struggle rather than as natural, true, or inevitable, is intended to make possible a substantially more problematic *and* problematically more substantial assessment of the lasting presence of gay and lesbian pasts. Before turning in that direction, however, I consider in chapter 3 a more recent generation of lesbian and gay historiography that has developed the heuristic breakthrough of social constructionist arguments in a more refined way.

In chapter 4 I read past the abiding resonance of the imagined cultural geography of ancient Greece in white gay and lesbian historical fictions. Arguing that these conceptual models of Greek antiquity are neither inevitable nor innocent, I begin by looking at the salience of gender as an axis of differentiation in these “returns” to ancient Greece; then, I move on to develop an explicitly non-essentialized conception of cultural difference and positionality through which we might consider the reflexive constitution of contemporary gay and lesbian identities in relation to racial formation. The next chapter examines the construction of a paradoxical queer

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“common sense” across social differences effected through the symbolic dimensions of the Stonewall riots. At the same time that they work to construct a collective gay and lesbian identity, I suggest, representations of Stonewall also challenge that construction. In particular, I focus on race, gender, and politics as crucial points of difference and antagonism among queer historical subjects. Without diminishing the significance of Stonewall, these particular differences effectively challenge understandings of the riots that imagine them as moments in a narrative of queer redemption and that regard their yearly commemorations as periods of reconciliation of queer differences, rather than as staging grounds for insisting on those differences.

The sixth chapter pushes the project of queer cultural studies of history further by turning to several provocative texts by lesbians and gay men of color. Contesting the elision of difference in narratives of the queer past while also exploiting the problematic nature of historical representations themselves to address how those representations construct notions of self, community, and politics, these texts’ specific re/writings of community, nation, and the body make promising interventions into the cultural politics of history and offer suggestive alternative models for queer historical representation.

I end with a return to historical representation and the question of subjectivity at the vexing crossroads between the past and the future which we call the present.

During the period of writing this book, I have continually been struck by an insistent paradox. Although I firmly believe that all writing is in some sense autobiographical, I have also felt that it would be necessary – for me – in a critical study of queer fictions of the past to transgress the limitations imposed on and by a kind of “autobiographical” writing in which my own subject position became the sole focus of my attention. In responding to abiding and pointed concerns about my attempt to write collectively of gay male and lesbian historical imaginations, I have found myself arguing that were I to abandon my attempt – not to write a co-gendered revisionist gay and lesbian history, but rather to look at how gender matters to queer fictions of the past – I ought to give up my inquiries into race matters as well and, indeed, into any other category of social differentiation. Under these conditions, the most inclusive book I could have written would have concerned itself exclusively with white gay male cultural practices, the least expansive with some version of my personal history. Although I do think both autobiography and studies of white male identity are valuable and necessary, I seriously doubt whether the particular form of “autobio-

graphical” writing that I have tried to resist in this study would have been sufficient to sustain a critical understanding of queer fictions of the past. The narrowness of such a project, it seems to me, is not only untenable in the world of complex and intersecting differences that inform queer social relations, but is also unsuitable to my private needs – thus, the paradoxical return of autobiography. Instead of focusing narcissistically, solipsistically on myself, I wanted to write – and hope to have written – a book that imagines the subjects of lesbian and gay studies as embodied, multiple, historical, fictive – and, yes, problematic. I return to the question of autobiographical writing in chapter 6. For an important study of white male subjectivity, see Fred Pfeil (1995).

To imagine the subjects of lesbian and gay studies in this way is to propose a very particular kind of collective difference. This *queer heterosociality* retains the irreducible differences between gay men and lesbians as historical subjects, for it is from difference itself that heterosociality derives its own troubled and troubling identity; queer heterosociality’s queerness is to be found in its resolute refusal to remove differences from the necessary historical identities it puts into conversation. (I have adapted the term “heterosociality” from Marc Stein who used it in a paper entitled “Doing It Together: When Homosexuals Heterosocialize,” which he presented at a conference on lesbian, bisexual and gay studies at the University of Illinois in 1992. In my revision, gender is a central but not the sole axis of differentiation among queer historical subjects.) The dialogical relationship among queer historical subjects fostered by this understanding of collective difference, I believe, can help reconstruct the late twentieth-century public sphere by enabling us to look critically at the particular ways we imagine ourselves, our communities, and our relationships to each other. In her essay “Out of the Past,” addressing the collectivizing experiences of gay and lesbian political and cultural developments in the post-Stonewall period, Jewelle Gomez offers the crucial reminder that “[o]ur movement is different from others; we have little shared, public history or culture.” Without ever once allowing it to diminish her critical stance toward the persistent racisms and sexism that have informed and undercut gay and lesbian movements, Gomez manages as well to retain the special significance of the ways in which “[o]ur gayness gives us a connection we would otherwise never have in heterosexual society” (Gomez, 1995: 18, 20). Her observant hypothesis is, I think, an instructive example that impels us toward critical engagements with the difficult hybridity of queer heterosociality.

Even as I (guardedly) view it as harboring a democratic promise for the future, I also want to give voice to certain reservations regarding such a

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project. I need, that is, to acknowledge not only my own continuing ambivalence (notwithstanding my desire to move beyond “autobiography”) but also the very real concerns of other participants in this often contentious dialogue. In a powerful reassertion of the need for a sustained feminist critique of “queer studies,” Jacquelyn Zita reads “the cosexual nature of lesbian and gay studies” as “a new heterosexual contract” (Zita, 1994: 258). However necessary such a “marriage” might be for creating a field of inquiry that looks most closely at homosexual oppression, she argues that “if this [new academic enterprise] entails submerging the differences between the sexes and erasing over two decades of feminist work on gender, race, class, and heterosexuality, the effort may not be worth it” (p. 259). Though bitter and angry about exclusionary practices, historical amnesia regarding feminist writings on the social construction of gender, and “postfeminist” male dramas in the academy, Zita ends her essay on a note of cautious optimism, “see[ing] some hope in the healthy tensions and contradictions of a lesbian and gay intellectual endeavor: namely, the possibility of reopening a wider discussion on gender, sexuality, class, race, and other differences in the context of queer experience” (p. 268). I share this hope, and it is as a contribution to such a wider discussion that I offer this book.

Acknowledgements

A number of readers have offered a wide variety of helpful, if not always heeded, criticism and advice at various stages of this project. For their input early on, I would like to thank Tomás Almaguer, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jim Clifford, Jeffrey Escoffier, Jackie Goldsby, Donna Haraway, Karl Knapper, Teresa de Lauretis, José Limón, Ming-Yeung Lu, and Carter Wilson. Hayden White, my dissertation advisor in the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California at Santa Cruz, provided necessary assistance in developing, writing, and completing the project from which this book developed. Two people in particular were essential to the transformation from dissertation to book: Catherine Max at Cambridge University Press, who provided necessary guidance along the way, and Avery Gordon, who read a draft of the manuscript and offered enormously helpful, provocative, and generous comments and suggestions for revisions that spurred me to sharpen my argument, alter its presentation, and expand its scope. I would also like to thank Rex Ray for designing the cover image and Jo North for copy-editing the manuscript. I owe my largest debt of gratitude to Steve Seidman whose initial interest in my project, practically since before it was begun, and continued suggestions and support have been critical to bringing this book to fruition.

The library and archival collections of several institutions proved invaluable to the research of this project. The University of California libraries at both the Santa Cruz and the Berkeley campuses, the library of San Francisco State University, and both the Main and Eureka Valley/Harvey Milk branches of the San Francisco Public Library collectively provided me with excellent opportunities to conduct my research. The Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California (GLHSNC) gave me access to a number of important documents in their archives. Bill Walker at the GLHSNC was especially helpful and quite willing to share his

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knowledge; he and Mary Boone Bowling in the manuscripts division of the New York Public Library went out of their way to furnish me with copies of several key texts on very short notice.

Several pieces of this book have appeared as works-in-progress in a number of publications. I am thankful for the helpful suggestions and feedback that the readers and editors of the following publications offered and for permission to use that material here: *Gender, Place, and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*; *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*; *perversions: The International Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*; *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); and *Socialist Review*.

Finally, I never would have been able to complete this book without the loving companionship and necessary distractions of Cashman Kerr Prince and the feline attentions of Meisje (who was always able to sleep even when I could not and whose playful curiosity explains one way of reading the epigraph to chapter 7).