

CHAPTER 15

## The Discipline Problem

### *Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History*

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In 1991, I was interviewed along with three other historians of sexuality by a history department at a small, elite Northeastern college. My interview ended in disaster. Someone asked: “How could undergraduates be expected to read Foucault?” Someone else asked: “Given your, uh, interests, could we expect that you would even know who the *presidents* were?” I was sent to talk to a dean who tactfully suggested to me that my subject of research was probably really within the domain of psychology, not history. The college hired none of the historians of sexuality, canceling the search entirely for two years.<sup>1</sup>

In 1992, I covered the Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference at Rutgers University for *The Village Voice*.<sup>2</sup> I called the organizers to ask why there were so few historical or ethnographic panels. I was told that there were in fact *many* historical panels that the organizers had made special efforts to include. These were pointed out to me. Nearly all the presentations featured analyses of fictional texts, given by people employed in English departments.

I tell these two stories to make this point: lesbian and gay historians are relatively isolated from two crucial sources of support—the material and institutional support of university history departments, and the intellectual engagement and support of other scholars in the field of lesbian and

gay or queer studies. And for both academic and public intellectuals, isolation leads to material as well as cultural impoverishment and decline.

Academic and intellectual isolation (though not political isolation) used to be generally shared within lesbian and gay studies. The first generation of scholars often worked outside the university, or in uneasy relationship with the few institutions supporting their scholarship.<sup>3</sup> During the past decade, however, a new generation of lesbian and gay scholars has been welcomed into the academy; opportunities for jobs and publication have expanded exponentially. But this welcome is both limited and far from secure. Unfortunately, history departments in particular remain largely hostile environments for new work in lesbian and gay studies. Why?

With a very few exceptions, history departments are not hiring historians of sexuality. Most of the work within history departments, particularly on lesbian and gay history in the U.S., is being done by scholars who got tenure before beginning their research in this area. And because so few have been hired, few new such historians are being trained. Again, why? I think this failure is not solely or even largely due to conservatism or stark prejudice (though I do not mean to underestimate the continuing importance of these sources of hostility). I would attribute the failure to hire and train historians of sexuality, and lesbian and gay historians specifically, to at least three other significant factors: (1) Sexuality, as a subject matter, is treated as trivial, as more about gossip than politics, more about psychology than history. The subject generates much nervous joking at faculty meetings and symposia. Even progressive and leftist historians are not exempt from treating sexuality as somehow disconnected from, and less important than, other subjects of research. (2) Lesbian and gay history, particularly, is understood as the history of a marginalized “minority” population, as the story of a small percentage of the citizenry and their doings. This history is seldom understood as linked to the study of a central historical process—the production and organization of sexualities. This is a problem that afflicts historians of race and gender as well, when their work is understood as “about” marginalized or ghettoized populations—women, African-Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans or Native Americans—rather than as concerned with the operations of social hierarchies in the broadest possible sense. (A well-known historian was quoted to me by a graduate student as saying in his U.S. history survey course: “I’m using the word ‘race,’ now, but it’s really a code word we use for African-Americans.”) (3) Historians of sexuality fit uneasily into existing job categories, and may be considered only if they have a “major” field in women’s history, family history or cultural history. Search committees will often then debate whether the candidate is “really” a women’s historian

or a historian of sexuality, for instance. There are virtually no advertisements that even mention history of sexuality or lesbian and gay history; the most likely relevant job category for such historians is cultural history. But history of sexuality should not have to hide itself under the supposedly “broader” rubric of cultural history, any more than women’s history should have to hide itself within family history.

Relations with history departments are just the first difficulty faced by the field of lesbian and gay history. In addition, as lesbian/gay studies has expanded, work has become increasingly concentrated in fields devoted to textual analysis—primarily literary and media studies based in the twentieth century. Students interested in lesbian and gay studies have turned to these growth areas, where there is acceptance and faculty support, when considering graduate studies; they are frequently warned away from history departments. Thus there has been a progressive impoverishment of the empirical, historical grounding for textual analyses of various sorts. The impressive expansion of increasingly sophisticated analyses is balanced precariously atop a stunted archive. (We get yet another article on Gertrude Stein, without any accompanying expansion of the research base for analyzing the changing discursive context for her writing at the turn of the century.<sup>4</sup>)

The difficulty here is not merely one of imbalanced growth, however; it is also one of strained relations between what is now being called “queer theory,” and lesbian and gay history. Queer theory, located within or in proximity to critical theory and cultural studies, has grown steadily in publication, sophistication and academic prestige. Queer theorists are engaged in at least three areas of critique: (1) the critique of humanist narratives which posit the progress of the self and of history, and thus tell the story of the heroic progress of gay liberationists against forces of repression, (2) the critique of empiricist methods which claim directly to represent the transparent “reality” of “experience,” and claim to relate, simply and objectively, what happened, when and why, and (3) the critique of identity categories presented as stable, unitary or “authentic.”

These critiques, applied to lesbian and gay history texts, might produce a fascinating discussion—but so far, they have not. Queer theorists have generally either ignored lesbian/gay history texts, or treated them with condescension. Lesbian and gay historians, in turn, have largely ignored the critical implications of queer theory for their scholarly practice.<sup>5</sup>

Queer theorists’ condescending treatment of earlier ghettoized authors and texts has often struck me as a kind of projected shame, or perhaps a fear of the humiliation associated with the ghetto. The emphasis in much academically privileged work on the analysis of canonized literary

and artistic texts or widely circulated pop culture texts implicitly aligns the critic with privilege or popularity. The relative neglect of studies of ghettoized or stigmatized populations and texts keeps the associated denigration and humiliation at a distance. When earlier, ghettoized work by lesbian and gay scholars goes unacknowledged, or is dismissed with an implied sneer, the hierarchy which has endowed the academic author with greater institutional resources and cultural privilege is reinforced. How radical! How subversive and transformative!

On the other hand, the lack of engagement by lesbian and gay historians with critical theory and cultural studies (widely shared by historians in general, especially historians of the U.S.) is proving to be a devastating mistake. Though I would not argue that it is necessary for all historians to become poststructuralists, or to write within the framework of cultural studies, I would argue that it is necessary to *engage* with cultural and critical theory across disciplinary lines in order to remain intellectually vital. And for lesbian and gay history, the need for such engagement is especially pressing—historicizing sexuality is a project that demands rigorous analysis of changing identity categories, and explication of the ideological work that such categories perform. Theoretical texts characterized by attention to the workings of systems of representation, and by close analysis of categorical imperatives and codes of language embedded in particular ideological regimes, can challenge and enrich the work of historians. Social history methods, based on empirical strategies that treat documentary sources as transparent windows onto the “real” experience of populations, hinder our ability to analyze the ideological construction of “documents,” and hide the political narratives underpinning our own texts. Until lesbian and gay historians engage the critical implications of queer theory—as well as race theory, feminist theory and emerging theoretical work on nationalism and imperialism—their productions will constitute a political and intellectual backwater (a backwater within queer studies, and within intellectual life more broadly).

Let me be more concrete, and give examples of the lack of engagement I am talking about.

## I

In 1990, Jeffrey Escoffier published a widely discussed article, “Inside the Ivory Closet: The Challenges Facing Lesbian and Gay Studies.”<sup>6</sup> Jeff Escoffier, an activist and intellectual in the Bay area and now in New York City, has been an editor of *Socialist Review*, an organizer of the San Francisco Lesbian/Gay Historical Society, and a founder and editor of the now defunct national lesbian and gay quarterly *Out/Look*. He also has a

Ph.D. in sociology, and has taught and published widely in lesbian and gay studies over a period of two decades. “Inside the Ivory Closet,” published in *Out/Look*, was an attempt to sketch out a generational conflict that Escoffier saw emerging in his field between Stonewall era scholars with roots in political communities (mostly historians and archivists, also some sociologists, anthropologists and journalists) and post-Stonewall academics with disciplinary concerns and university jobs (largely literary scholars and critical theorists). In this article, Escoffier carefully maps out the history and accomplishments of the first generation during the period 1969 to 1983, and includes the work of radical feminists and gay leftists, women of color and sex radicals. He argues that the major intellectual accomplishment of this diversely productive crew was the critique of essentializing, universal categories of identity, and the forging of a theory of the historical, social construction of lesbian and gay identities—identities of recent vintage which have intersected and interacted with changing identities of race, gender, class and nation. He then warns that the work of this first generation is in danger of being erased and replaced by that of the second, more privileged generation of lesbian and gay academics.

Escoffier specifically asks whether the second generation is losing touch with the political concerns of lesbian and gay communities through its deployment of an arcane and frequently obfuscating language, and its address to limited audiences who are schooled in technical vocabularies and subscribe to rarefied academic journals. He asks whether this younger generation is falling out of dialogue with broad-based publics, becoming an unrepresentative and intellectually narrow professional elite.

In asking these questions, Escoffier is expressing the anxieties and resentments of his peers—frustrated lesbian/gay historians, sociologists and anthropologists (among others) who believe that their work is being ghettoized, not just within university departments but by lesbian/gay studies scholars as well. Many of these activist-intellectuals see their pioneering work being strip-mined for research and insights, but not cited or engaged seriously by queer theorists. But in representing this frustration, Escoffier does not engage with the projects and points of view of the second generation whose work he questions. Though he offers a list of the names of scholars, including David Miller, Lee Edelman and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (among others), he does not map the work or lay out the accomplishments of those who have been publishing in the years since 1983, as he does for the earlier authors and publications. This is because it is the first generation on whose behalf he is writing. It is the earlier work that he wants to describe and defend, in the face of denigration or erasure.

In structuring his argument this way, Escoffier has set up an opposition between generations that overstates both the homogeneity within each group and the points of contrast between them. He neglects the possibility that many among the first generation may become narrow themselves, “out of touch” with younger activists as well as intellectuals. He omits mention of the many bridge or transition figures whose work cannot be easily slotted into his generational schema. In correctly pointing out the importance of community-based institutions for Stonewall-era scholarship (especially periodicals such as the Toronto-based newspaper, *The Body Politic*, and history projects such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives), he invents a location of imagined unity and political authenticity—“the community.” And he completely omits any mention of the many theoretically informed, younger scholar-activists who exemplify precisely the sort of politically engaged work he admires in the first generation—writers such as Cindy Patton and Kobena Mercer.

Nonetheless, Escoffier’s article pointed out a tension, and the existence of a hierarchy that is painfully obvious to most of those situated at its lower end. He performed the invaluable service of articulating a grievance, and offering a history and defense for a decade’s worth of pioneering scholarship, much of it eked out in the margins of daily lives consumed with wage labor, and stigmatized outside of the ghettoized communities in which it was forged. Interestingly, academic scholars of Escoffier’s second generation gossiped and grouched about the article, but did not respond to it seriously. Though it was being discussed nearly everywhere I went during the year it was published, those included on the post-Stonewall list ignored it in print, and occasionally shunned Escoffier in person.

Even someone as politically sensitive and personally generous as Eve Sedgwick succumbed to the mood of condescension. In a review of Cindy Patton’s book, *Inventing AIDS*, for the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Newsletter* in 1991, Sedgwick responded to Escoffier’s salvo. She used Patton’s book as an example to correctly argue that Escoffier had completely neglected AIDS activism and scholarship, and had thus missed one of the most significant crossroads for theory and politics during the 1980s. But she then goes on to concede absolutely nothing to Escoffier’s article. She recognizes no hierarchies, perceives no basis for his concerns. (It makes one wonder—are hierarchies *always* invisible to those who profit from them?) She misrepresents his arguments, quoting him out of context, and concludes her piece by calling him “anti-intellectual.”<sup>7</sup> I wonder if this particular accusation, in an academic newsletter, would be as acceptable if Escoffier were a professor rather than a public intellectual and activist?

Sedgwick's was one of a very small number of responses to Escoffier in print. But if the article had touched such a nerve, if it was worth gossip and insult, then surely it merited acknowledgment and serious debate.<sup>8</sup>

## 2

There are very few figures who can cross over the gap between the practice of history and the arguments of critical theory, and there are few historians who can speak specifically to the ramifications for women's history of feminist theorists' work on gender. Joan Scott occupies both those roles, bringing both critical theory and the insights of feminists to an often-reluctant historical profession. The republication of her article "The Evidence of Experience" in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David Halperin's *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* is a clear indication of the importance of Scott's work for the field of lesbian and gay studies as well. This article elegantly presents the post-structuralist critique of the use of the category of "experience" by historians, and of the strategy of "giving voice to the voiceless" or "making the invisible visible."

The article begins with an extended quotation from Samuel Delany's memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water*, which describes his vision of a scene inside a gay bathhouse in 1963. Scott presents Delany's observations ("what *this* experience said was that there was a population—not of individual homosexuals ... not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex") and interprets him to claim that,

Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects. In this conceptualization, the visible is privileged; writing is then put at its service. Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience.<sup>9</sup>

She then makes an abrupt transition by arguing that, "This kind of communication has long been the mission of historians documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past." This shift from the workings of memory in memoir to the mission of history signals the logic of the rest of the article. Scott takes critical aim at the reliance of social historians on an unexamined notion of "experience," which serves as a foundational concept in their discourse.

Scott's critique, following upon her use of Delany, centers the work of historians of homosexuality as illustrative of the practices of historians of difference in general. She critiques this work in the following manner:

Histories that document the "hidden" world of homosexuality, for example, show the impact of silence and repression on the lives of those affected by it and bring to light the history of their suppression and exploitation. But the project of making experience visible *precludes* [emphasis added] critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause. ... History is a chronology that makes experience visible, but in which categories appear as nonetheless ahistorical: desire, homosexuality, heterosexuality, femininity, masculinity, sex, and even sexual practices become so many fixed entities being played out over time, but not themselves historicized. Presenting the story in this way excludes, or at least understates, the historically variable interrelationship between the meanings "homosexual" and "heterosexual," the constitutive force each has for the other, and the contested and changing nature of the terrain that they simultaneously occupy.<sup>10</sup>

But *whom* is Scott critiquing here? Clearly, she has shifted ground away from Delany, though his memoir provides the platform she steps off from. She is evidently critiquing lesbian and gay history texts, but she does not cite or quote a single one in the text or notes to her entire article. Later in the article, she does cite feminist historians of whom she is critical (Judith Newton and Christine Stansell), and she provides an extended critique of a widely circulated article by John Toews (this article's defense of the historical concept of "experience" seems ultimately to be her central target).<sup>11</sup> But lesbian and gay history texts, which provide her with the initial critical focus for her arguments, appear as mute and primitive "others," spoken for but unreferenced, and profoundly misrepresented in Scott's exegesis.

For example, Scott argues that the texts she is describing present homosexual and heterosexual as "fixed immutable identities," and claims that categories appear as "ahistorical." Certainly, many lesbian/gay political texts do use these categories ahistorically; the dominant discourses of liberal lesbian and gay political action take the homosexual/heterosexual polarity as universal and axiomatic. But most lesbian and gay historians have challenged such assumptions, and have placed the historicizing and

denaturalizing of categories of sexual identity at the center of their agendas. Following on the pioneering work of Jeffrey Weeks and John D’Emilio, who presented the historical emergence of the homo/hetero polarity over the last century as political, contingent and contested, Jonathan Ned Katz wrote in 1983,

Because the homosexual/heterosexual distinction became the socially dominant usage, and is still so, it is useful to note in some detail that opposition in the process of its earliest American formulation. The homosexual/heterosexual distinction is now so deeply ingrained that it is difficult for us to think in other terms. An historical view helps us to situate the homo/hetero dualism in time, and distance ourselves from it. ...

To the extent that homosexual and heterosexual represent a limiting imposition on humanity, a labeling created for the purpose, and functioning in the interest of social control, we should consider how to transcend that polarity in theory and practice. To the extent that “lesbian” and “gay” represent, simply, reverse affirmations of the old homosexuality, thereby reproducing it, we need to ask how we might transcend ... categorization. ...<sup>12</sup>

This kind of argument is not unique, but has appeared in lesbian and gay history texts since the late 1970s. If Scott had engaged with these texts, she would have needed to significantly alter her argument. Weeks, D’Emilio and Katz (among many others) undertake a project that Scott describes as simply impossible when she writes that “the project of making experience visible *precludes* critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation,” and so on. Weeks and company set out specifically to make the historical “experience” of lesbians and gay men “visible” *at the same time* that categories of identity are presented as historical, contingent and political—as products of changing and contested systems of representation. At a minimum, including such texts would have required that Scott acknowledge and critically evaluate this project (there is much in these texts with which she might take issue, without resorting to misrepresentation), rather than dismiss it so presumptively with that little word “precludes.”

Scott expends a lot of ink in “The Evidence of Experience” restating the Foucauldian critique of the repressive hypothesis, while erroneously attaching that hypothesis to lesbian and gay history texts—texts that explicitly contested the repressive hypothesis and approvingly cited Foucault themselves by the early 1980s. But she also offers an exploration of historians’ use of the category of “experience” as foundational, and explores

the possibilities for an antifoundationalist historical practice. These latter projects are timely, compelling and important for the future of history writing. And she supplies a model in her article for a way of returning to reconsider a text for which she had earlier provided a reductive reading. Toward the end of “The Evidence of Experience” she writes,

The reading I offered of Delany at the beginning of this essay is an example of the kind of reading I want to avoid. I would like now to present another reading—one suggested to me by literary critic Karen Swann—as a way of indicating what might be involved in historicizing the notion of experience.<sup>13</sup>

The rereading Scott goes on to provide is nuanced and sensitive to the ways in which memory, history and sight are related in Delany’s work. She rejects her earlier flattening of his observations into a distorted polemic. I would suggest that she return to the lesbian and gay history texts she reads with similar reductiveness, and engage in dialogue with them. Rather than an opposition, in which her own theoretical sophistication is offered as wholly superior to the mute and dominated texts she leaves uncited, she might produce instead a critical dialogue in which appreciation might play some role. As it stands, the hierarchy she produces in her article only reproduces the privilege of the elite academic voice over the writing of those who have labored with far less support, reward and recognition for their work.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of direct engagement that I am pointing to here is two-sided. Scott does not refer directly to the texts she implicitly critiques, and no lesbian or gay historian thus far (including myself) has responded to Scott’s widely circulated article.

Lack of engagement, isolation ... for lesbian and gay history the result is a kind of homelessness. Much work goes on without consistent material or institutional support (Jonathan Ned Katz, Allan Bérubé). Other historical work takes place in English departments (Henry Abelove, Martha Vicinus) or in institutionally marginal interdisciplinary locations (especially women’s studies). Major figures in the field of lesbian/gay history often teach at institutions which do not train graduate students (John D’Emilio, Henry Abelove). Venues for publication on lesbian/gay topics support a broad range of literary and media studies (from *differences* to *Discourse*, *Cultural Critique* to *Cultural Studies*), but the only journal consistently publishing lesbian/gay history is the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. (We have yet to see what will happen with *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*).

Clearly, this is a dismal situation. So what is to be done? I have three suggestions which track the three major complaints that I have mentioned:

- History departments should hire and train historians of sexuality. In order to accomplish this, job categories must be restructured. The current distribution of chronological, thematic and regional categories in history department divisions of labor needs fundamental rethinking to leave behind the present thoroughly colonial arrangements—in which Europe and the U.S. occupy the center and their former colonies the margins, and in which “political” history is understood narrowly but evaluated broadly, while histories of women and people of color are considered peripheral.<sup>15</sup> If history departments are to be forward-looking, they also should hire in areas now located oddly in English departments. For instance, why should cultural studies be consigned to English departments? Hiring in cultural studies would be one way for history departments to bring in the kind of engagement with cultural and critical theories that generate productive interdisciplinary dialogue. This would help create the kind of intellectual environment in which lesbian/gay history might thrive.
- Lesbian and gay historians must engage with queer theory, take its arguments seriously, review theoretical texts, take issue with its distortions of historical work. It is a terrible mistake to dismiss work in queer theory as jargon-ridden, elitist claptrap, as some do. Recent work on racial formations, new publications on the historical construction of nationalism, and continuing debates within feminist theory must also be engaged by lesbian and gay historians.
- Queer studies must recognize the importance of empirically grounded work in history, anthropology and social and political theory (as Michael Warner has also recently argued, in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*).<sup>16</sup> Scholars in this field must also acknowledge their debt to earlier, ghettoized texts. I cannot count the number of times I have read a queer studies article clearly indebted to the research and writing of Jeannette Foster, Jonathan Ned Katz or Esther Newton, that then footnotes only Continental theory, or Stuart Hall.

Like any other field, lesbian and gay historians need material support and intellectual and political exchange. For us, isolation equals cultural and professional death.