

British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives
edited by Brian Lewis

Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013
(ISBN: 978-0-7190-8895-7). 306pp.

Christina Johnson (University of Glasgow)

British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives, edited by Brian Lewis, Professor of History at McGill University, features a collection of essays demonstrating the multidisciplinary nature of queer theory. It considers the interactivity of archival, literary, art historical, (auto)biographical and print media sources for the interpretation of historical events. The variety of approaches reflected in these essays highlights the complexity of queer theory and the instability of it as a term. This ‘fuzziness’ is acknowledged by Lewis as one of the methodological problems of queer theory, but also as the source of its richness which allows a breadth of reading into social, cultural and personal history (Philips 2009, p.2). Lewis is explicit that his goal was ‘for complexity (but also accessibility)’ (p.5) to provide a new analysis of queerness within British historiography upon which future generations of researchers can build. He acknowledges the tensions between the views of the contributors to this project which, while highlighting the flexibility of queer theory, does sometimes disrupt the reading experience (p. 4).

Through the wide range of sources used in this collection some unifying themes emerge: the idea of queerness as methodology rather than identity; how queer identity can be communicated and identified without becoming enmeshed in a series of binary relationships around

gender, sexuality and subjectivity; and the difficulty of extracting queer theory from other methodological approaches, as discussed later in this review, without being reductive.

The term 'queer theory', first popularised by Teresa de Lauretis in the early 1990s, continues to defy a singular interpretation and it is this epistemological fluidity that *British Queer History* attempts to exploit (Watson 2005, p.69). This lack of fixity about queerness and its relationship to LGBT and feminist theories, and discourses of class, gender and race (Jagose 2009, 158) is addressed specifically in Mo Moulton's essay about Katherine Everett, and by Matt Houlbrook's consideration of how queer theory assists with understanding largely unknown sexualities as queerness and homosociality intersect.

Structured chronologically, the essays span the period from the 1820s to the late 1970s. The first and last essays reflect the differing tensions of the two periods as played out in media portrayals. This book-ending neatly reflects the idea of a progression from a repressive regime against the homosexual in the early nineteenth century and an apparent relaxation of policing homosexuality, but enforcement through censorship of heteronormative domestic ideologies in the twentieth century. The figure of the writer, as an observer of the world but now under observation, is a repeated motif unifying the essays.

Charles Upchurch's essay starts the collection with a detailed examination of how technological advances have opened up new ways of engaging with archival material. Upchurch acknowledges that 'allusion and innuendo' (p.6) can be lost through this, establishing one of the main themes of this collection: if homosexuality dare not speak its name, how does one read queerness back into documentary evidence that can approach the subject only obliquely? The essays return in different ways to this idea of communicating queerness, such

as in Linkof's essay about society gossip columnists in the interwar popular press, Bengry's analysis of the queer marketplace for *Films and Filming* magazine, and Minto's essay about Antony Grey's participation in the Homosexual Law Reform Society. The social and cultural context is seen as crucial to understanding the interpretation of queerness within British history.

The writer becomes an arbiter of queerness when constructing, disseminating and consuming the news and ideas of sexuality. While being openly gay remained dangerous, a particular type of queerness was perceived as acceptable by the mainstream. In Linkof's analysis the society gossip becomes a figure upon which any number of characteristics can be attributed simultaneously determining, reinforcing and undermining his sexual identity. As harmlessly entertaining, Linkof suggests that he was granted privileged access to, but not participation in, elite society and female homosocial groups. Most attempts, these essays suggest, to normalise or assimilate the notion of queerness into a heteronormative construct is shown to have been resisted or subverted, or overtly accepted but ridiculed, as in the case of Beverley Nichols who, behind the scenes, was scathing about the readership of his newspaper column which exposed the artifice of celebrity life. Exceptions to this include the analyses of the works of Henry Tuke (chapter two), Anthony Grey (chapter eight), and Godfrey Winn in particular, who poignantly expressed the difficulty of reconciling concealment with his identity as a writer (chapter five).

Each essay relies upon archival material to interpret the lives of its subjects. The collection deftly interrogates how queer identity is part of wider social anxieties about sexuality, class and gender: drawing a 'critical distinction between "queerness as being" and "queerness as method"', 'queer' is not about sex but interpretation

(p.7). This anxiety, however, is shown to have functioned as much to exclude the sexual other as to have defined increasingly restrictive norms of heterosexuality. By offering queerness a voice of unconventionality and alterity, it is seen defining heterosexuality by what it was not, rendering it equally reductive for both.

The interactivity of different ways of interpreting identity is examined in detail in Waters's essay 'The Homosexual as a Social Being', which explores homosexuality's categorisation as a 'social problem' (p.198). The idea of the subjectivity of the male body as a site of debate and interpretation is approached if not resolved when specifically located within the binary discourses of masculinity and femininity, ideas also explored by Laura Doan (chapter 4) who offers a nuanced analysis of the medicalisation of the language of sexuality.

This association of the body and disorder is analysed in Houlbrook's essay, which explores how the feminization of boys was seen as resulting from a rhetoric of maternity which argued that over-mothering lead to fundamental social instability. Here, the mother referred to is the victim of matricide. Laying the blame for social problems at mothers' feet becomes increasingly problematic because women are largely absent from this volume.

This masculinist lopsidedness is troubling as, save for Moulton and Tooth Murphy's chapters, women as subjects are silent. This failure to incorporate the female experience speaks to the continued association of women's experience with feminist theory, when a more integrative approach may serve better. As this volume shows, none of the subjects or their means of communicating are one-dimensional. The shortage of women is therefore foregrounded by their absence suggesting as it does that women's experience can be sequestered elsewhere. This is a crucial weakness in any text about contemporary

queer theory and disrupts the overall cohesion of the essays as a narrative of British queer history.

If the agenda was to be comprehensive, as Lewis's introduction suggests, then this lack materially undermines that attempt. Nonetheless, this is an otherwise fascinating collection addressing the diversity of approaches available for reading queerness within British history. It would interest any student of gender and sexuality, as well as a more general audience. It certainly achieves its goal of raising more questions than it answers, even if not all of them were intentionally asked.

Bibliography

Jagose, Annamarie. 2009. Feminism's Queer Theory. *Feminism & Psychology* 19 (157). 158.

Phillips, Chas. 2009. Difference, Disagreement and the Thinking of Queerness. *Borderlands* 8 (2), 2.

Watson, Katherine. 2005. Queer Theory. *Group Analysis* 38 (67). 69.