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Disturbing practices: history, sexuality and women's experience of modern war. (An excerpt)

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This article turns to the First World War's unsettling effects on the lives of women in Britain to argue that our access to the complex terrain of sexuality has been circumscribed by the resilience in lesbian, gay, and queer history of the genealogical project that emerged from 1970s' liberation politics and, later, the Foucauldian analysis of knowledge and power. As an organizing metaphor genealogy has been useful in broadening the scope of the sexual past, tracking ancestries of both similitude and rupture, yet there is much that it occludes. Despite queer theory's interrogation of identity, genealogy continues to categorize human experience as normative or deviant. To rethink available pathways in historicizing sexuality in relation to gender, race, nation, and class, this project discovers an ideal site in the communities and desires of Anglo-American women who exploited the social disruptions of World War I. This cultural moment highlights some of the problems that currently vex identity history's dominant mode of inquiry and allows the envisioning of how sexuality might be studied differently.

Key words

History of sexuality, First World War, lesbian, gay, queer, Foucault

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Rethinking history . . . means rethinking what is new and 'unheard of.'
Hayden White (2007)

The queer must insist on disturbing.
Lee Edelman (2004)

Introduction

Disturbing Practices explores the friendships, communities, and work of a few British women who served in various capacities during the First World War. It looks at women such as Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm, who lived together near the Belgian front lines for most of the war and captured national headlines for their personal courage in caring for the wounded; the Honorable Violet Douglas-Pennant, the onetime head of the Women's Royal Air Force until her career was ruined by rumors alleging sexual immorality; and Florence Eva Harley, a former nurse in the British Red Cross, who initiated legal action against a man she believed had besmirched her honor. Their letters, diaries, and memoirs, as well as their words as reported in the press, attest to the many "extraordinary" changes wrought by the unusual circumstances of war, for life in Britain between 1914 and 1918 "was not a normal time."¹ New forms of meaningful employment tested these women's physical, mental, and moral strength, expanded the configurations and expressions of gender, and allowed greater independence and mobility, even adventurous travel. Above all, for the historian with interests in sexuality, war work threw these women together with others of their sex. Yet, while parliamentary papers and newspaper stories confirm that sex talk was rampant, little is known about how the sexual was understood or talked about by the women themselves, or by others. My purpose in closely examining the material traces of these women's lives is not to find acts or identities that warrant inclusion or exclusion in a modern British lesbian history or queer history. Instead, I turn to these historical examples to disturb current practices in historicizing sexuality, in particular practices that position the homosexual or queer subject near the center of investigative curiosity. Let me say at the outset that I do not regard the project of historicizing homosexuality as somehow intrinsically flawed, naive, useless, outmoded, epistemologically compromised, or in any other way irredeemably problematic. On the contrary, unlike those who call for its undoing, in this book I seek to clarify its ethical value and political purpose, indeed its very capacity to give rise to new practices born of sustained dialogic exchange between two fields at present so distant that their intellectual affinities have gone unrecognized: queer studies and critical history, the latter committed to producing historical knowledge grounded in the empirical and framed by critical theory.²

I did not start out with the aim of anatomizing the diverse practices of lesbian, gay, and queer history, a subfield of academic history but also carried out by multiple practitioners who configure their work in accordance with the rules of their respective disciplines. This undertaking came about by accident when I realized that many of my discoveries about the structure and organization of female sexuality in the modern sexual past made little sense in the context of a historiographical practice in conversation with *lesbian and gay* identity or even a practice alert to a *queer* identity as fluid, mutable, or unstable. As I explain at length, the predominant historiographical mode of lesbian, gay, and queer history is genealogical, which is the reason I refer throughout to the *genealogical project*. A slippery and ill-defined concept, genealogy denotes—confusingly—both the act of tracing one's lineage, as in family history, and the

name of a “critical history” practice most often associated with Michel Foucault, who called for denaturalizing and defamiliarizing categories taken for granted in the present in order to understand the subject as constructed within history.³ Writing this book would have been far simpler if lesbian and gay history (what I term *ancestral genealogy*) could be seen as pursuing narratives of origins, displaced by a queer history (a practice I call *queer genealogy*) informed by a Foucauldian genealogy renowned for problematizing narratives of origins. Unfortunately, the history of the historicizing of lesbian, gay, and queer lives is much messier, with elements of earlier forms of politically infused lesbian and gay practices embedded in queer practices. And to add to the confusion, once mobilized these distinctive trajectories are ongoing and address different readers for a range of purposes.

No example captures as succinctly the shared concerns, but also fraught relations, between ancestral and queer genealogical practices as the debates concerning the cultural meanings of the notorious Allan/Billing case of 1918. This case involved the Canadian dancer Maud Allan, who sued the radical right-wing member of parliament Noel Pemberton Billing, for claiming she belonged to the “cult of the clitoris”—a designation ancestral practitioners equate categorically with modern female homosexuality, though queer observers prefer to hedge their bets (Cohler 2010:128–143). In the context of a narrative of subcultural emergence, women’s studies specialist Cohler positions the lesbian at the center of the proceedings and points to the influence of sexology (in tandem with the rhetoric of a related trial in 1918 concerning the government ban of Rose Allatini’s novel *Despised and Rejected*) as crucial in securing “female homosexuality” as knowable (ibid.). Reading this case queerly, literary critic Jodie Medd reorients the interpretive frame to unpack the spectacular phrase “cult of the clitoris,” which she explains as a “hermeneutical enigma” to invoke “the suggestion of lesbianism” (2002:25). Albeit for different purposes, both assert the case’s huge significance in raising public awareness of female sexual deviancy and reach conclusions so similar it is difficult to tell them apart. Either the trial exposes “wartime nationalistic homophobia,” “highlights the increasingly direct relationship of lesbian erotics to the law,” and “cements the bond between an expanding rhetorical power of female homosexuality and British nationalism during World War I,” or it foments “national wartime paranoia,” “conflate[s] spy fever with homophobia,” and offers “a sensationally effective and exquisitely elusive means of figuring Britain’s political and epistemological crises of modern history” (Cohler 2010:128,146; Medd 2002:28, 31, 44). To a greater or lesser extent, both accept the lesbian’s “value” for Billing as a tactic in fueling the highly charged atmosphere of the courtroom, thereby maximizing publicity for his criticism of the government’s conduct of the war.

Still, this case merits little more than a footnote in social and cultural historical accounts of the war’s impact on British society—a lack of interest I find exceptionally interesting in suggesting that the persistent marginalizing of the history of sexuality is not unrelated to the objectives of ancestral *and* queer genealogical practices (Marwick 1970; De Groot 1996; Robb 2002; Gregory 2008). The focal point of the ancestral may be the sticking point for the queer, but either way the discussion pivots around the relative salience of a modern category, lesbianism. Whether coherent or incoherent, knowable or unknowable, speakable or unspeakable, secure or suggestible, these scholars understand the objective of historical explanation as measuring the past against current understandings—and, in so doing, they “discover” danger and deviance because it is the lesbian (or lesbianism) that matters. This is not a “wrong” conclusion, as if there were a “correct” historical interpretation that eludes them. My point is that

these practitioners trace back from the present moment, so each detects “homophobia” in wartime nationalist discourses (a term first available in 1969) or collusion and “conspiracy” between a magistrate and counsel (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed February 12, 2012; Cohler 2010:146; Medd 2002:34). I have different questions about this case. As a historical example of insalubrious name calling, this trial provides a good opportunity to see how sexuality was structured and organized in 1918. This is why *Disturbing Practices* calls for analytical frameworks alert to meanings outside the context of identity. To account for contradictions and illogicalities of a “lesbian” both central and irrelevant entails a mode of historicizing that does not construct “a past reality” of the “covered over, hidden or repressed” or dismantle an “ornate cover story which blocks access to the past” as seen in the trope of “suggestibility” (White 2007:228). I do not see alternative practices shedding new light on the darkness of identity history; rather, I envisage the potential of practices that acknowledge the “vast domain of historical unknowability” (Megill 1998:36–62).

In this book I want to critique and assess what identity history can and cannot deliver—not to dismiss it as inadequate for its singular and abiding interest in the force of modern identity categories, which would seriously underestimate and undervalue the power of its insistence on recognition (as connected or disconnected), its cogent reminder of sexuality’s importance. I am curious what a “queer” critical history of sexuality might look like if it were to embark with an unknowingness about the past to discover what is now “unheard of.” I see scope for a different practice that draws on the methodologies of queer genealogy *not* to trace queer beings at any given moment, but to understand how sexual difference “is established, how it operates, [and] how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (Scott 1991:777). I am fully aware that some queer scholars believe their work *already* seeks to understand sexuality in precisely this way—how difference is established, its operations, and how it constitutes the subject. Why ask for a queer critical history practice when this is already being done? In a sense, *Disturbing Practices* offers a long-winded answer by drawing attention to the impulses of identity politics that linger in queer genealogical practices. Queer genealogy *has* a history itself, and if those residual elements drive its interest in the pursuit of sexual pasts, we need to grasp how this complicates its ambitions to be genealogical in the Foucauldian sense.

To reiterate, I did not begin this project feeling an urgent need to rethink the purposes of historicizing vis-à-vis the epistemological apparatus of sexuality on which identity history is based. This book changed as a result of the peculiarities and conceptual roadblocks I encountered in the archive. How, for instance, could a landlady’s testimony in 1920 that her husband gave her permission to sleep with the female plaintiff be accepted as proof of virtue beyond all doubt? Stranger still, why did no one in my case studies, either during the war or through the 1920s, appear to understand sexuality as an orientation or a category of being, knowable as deviant or normal? Some things just didn’t add up.

What I understood as “sexuality”—a modern analytical concept that structured erotic desires and sexual acts through taxonomies and identities—did not map onto the women I was investigating. Queer methodologies acutely alert to the significance of the unsaid are adept at clarifying the cultural meanings of “talk” that circulates “from mouth to mouth” and is “never formulated on paper”—yet in my materials the individual as a sexual being did not appear to lurk in people’s “nasty thoughts.” “Dirty things” proved “extraordinarily difficult” to nail down.⁴ Rumors and accusations of a

sexual nature put some of the women in my case studies in the national spotlight, but I found no private papers disclosing their innermost thoughts about their romantic entanglements or their sexual desires, preferences, or inclinations; and during the war and into the interwar period, none ever spoke of themselves or others in reference to modern categories of sexual identity. Particularly fascinating, however, were the reformulations of wartime events and experiences recounted later in interviews conducted in the 1960s, in which interviewees readily latched on to the labels and habits of thought familiar to us now.

Captivated by the conundrums of sexual knowledge itself and the problems of historicizing that knowledge, I began to worry about the limitations of any historiographical practice mediated by the knowledge structure of a “science” that was invented and developed in the late nineteenth century and flourished into the early decades of the twentieth: sexology (or sexual science), a project especially influential in modern Britain.⁵ To what extent, I wondered, were my questions about the sexual past informed by a scientific way of knowing “sexuality” as an edifice comprising categories and identities built out of a “host of different biological and mental possibilities, and cultural forms—gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires, fantasies, erotic practices, institutions, and values”? (Weeks 2003:7). Equally disturbing were the historiographical objectives that motivated my visits to the archive already determined by the residual forces of sexology’s operational habits of thought in constructing sexuality as categorizable and identifiable? Unraveling the cultural meanings and discursive formations of female sexuality in the early decades of the previous century demanded I step outside the logic of identity history because its knowledge apparatus seemed to bring sexuality into the light at the expense of casting other knowledge regimes into the dark. Lesbian, gay, and queer historians and historically minded (or historicist) critics have thought long and hard about questions concerning the discursive inadequacies of the infrastructure of sexological knowledge, its modern system of sexual classification, and the vexing problem of using identity labels to describe sexual subjects in the past. This project’s concerns lie elsewhere in highlighting the effects of the relative absence of self-reflexivity in the making of identity-based sexual history—the terrain, in other words, of historiography.

This book aims to anatomize the history of sexuality as a project divided by disciplinarity *and* the historiography of sexuality as a project divided by purpose; hence its two-part structure: “The Practice of Sexual History” and “Practicing Sexual History.” Part 1 lays the groundwork for part 2 in examining the complex historical conditions that shaped the historiography of sexuality as a field practiced across multiple disciplines, to serve competing agendas. Although the topic is largely unfamiliar in queer studies and often judged uninteresting by social and cultural historians, I regard historiography as a crucial starting point in encouraging intellectual exchange between queer studies and academic history and, more specifically, between queer studies and critical history, the latter an approach to, or method of, historical writing interested in a critical interrogation of “how that which is has not always been” (Foucault 1988:37).⁶ The two parts of the book—the historiographical overview in the context of disciplinarity and the case studies—engage a similar set of questions from two directions, to speculate on a praxis forged out of dialogical exchange between queer studies and academic history.

For some time now, relations between these two fields have been strained, if not estranged—a predicament not only puzzling and frustrating, but also profoundly

disappointing because, in several respects, queer studies and critical history are the products of the same post-Enlightenment critique; both, for instance, are skeptical of universalist metanarratives, transcendent categories, sequential linearity, narratives of progression, and “empty sameness” (Foucault 1980:117). If, this book asks, the queer genealogist and the critical historian reach into the same tool kit to create “possibilities of resistance” and “emancipatory futures,” what are the epistemic repercussions—for practitioners and their practices—in splitting apart at the level of historiographical purpose? (Bourke 2007:xii). This is perhaps the toughest question of all—and it cannot be explained solely by surveying lesbian, gay, and queer historiography. What is required, I argue, is actually showing the roadblocks through the writing of critical history, which is the reason the book’s second part grounds the abstract, theoretical discussions about the historiography of sexuality in the materiality of the sexual past through case studies. Illustrating some of the conceptual obstacles through specific examples foregrounds the importance of a self-reflexive practice in addressing questions relating to how historical knowledge of modern sexuality is organized and produced.

The historical past and the practical past

Harnessing disciplinary frictions and incompatibilities to the mutual advantage of multiple disciplines in order to broaden the historical understanding of sexuality, as this book attempts, is a risky venture. Nowhere is the strain more visible than in the frustration historians, even those well versed in theory, feel in seeking a secure hold on the word *queer*. Sociological historian Jeffrey Weeks wisely begins his account of the term with an apt reminder that queer originally denoted a figure linked with what was odd, twisted, or bent—a meaning lesbian and gay activists would later appropriate to describe a militant collective sexual politics (2012:523–539). With the advent of queer theory in the early 1990s, queer signaled a privileging of dissidence, subversion, transgression, and above all a radical critique of sexual identity. For nearly two decades the *queer* of queer theory and queer studies has proved extraordinarily useful for literary and cultural critics in unsettling the power of the homo/hetero binary, but its highly abstract and esoteric language has made it a difficult theoretical perspective for outsiders to navigate. No other concept in sexuality studies has so vexed and confused as queer, which, whether deployed as verb, noun, or adjective, revels in open-endedness, its playful resistance to definition rarely deterring ongoing speculation about its capabilities and limitations. Highly contested and lacking scholarly consensus, queer is valued by some for its inclusivity, as seen in its use as an umbrella term for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans) communities and identity politics, and treated by others as a rejection of identity—*nonidentity* as identity.

Yet another stumbling block for historians is that the queer characterization of historical practices, protocols, or methods maps only unevenly onto the ways historians understand their work. This is partly because the “history” queer studies encountered at its inception was a mode of social history content to leave theorizing to others. With the cultural turn (that is, the impact of the poststructuralist critique of language on historical practice), academic history has changed in ways that have largely gone unnoticed by queer practitioners, who sometimes mistake the distinctive concerns of lesbian and gay social history as representative of all historical practice. Queer *misunderstanding* of the discipline of history allows queer studies to depict it as enthralled by empirical evidence and truth claims. Now cut off from the dominant practices of history, queer scholars variously ignore it, reject it, misconstrue it, reinvent

it, or uncritically conflate the discipline with *pastness*. This disconnect needs to be examined closely to appreciate why even historical arguments play out differently between these two scholarly fields. Queer scholars, for instance, have been deeply influenced by historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's emphasis on the "elements of empathy, sincerity, intuition, generosity of spirit, and a sense of the possible" (White 2007:228).⁷ Historians, on the other hand, are divided in their judgment of work that appears to privilege affect over "forensic skills," to the point of suggesting that Chakrabarty's project more closely resembles "a literary work than a conventional history" (ibid.). This prospect, of course, is more threatening to historians than to historically aware queer scholars accustomed to negotiating the problem of evidence by cultivating a special relationship with literary expression. For philosopher of history Hayden White, Chakrabarty's "poetic history" produces "not so much history" as "the 'history effect'" and is, therefore, only tenuously related to history "proper."

Crafting arguments that speak to scholars with shared interests in history and sexuality across these disciplinary divides is further complicated by differences in style and expression, but more fundamental incompatibilities relate to the conventions and habits of praxis. However exaggerated these differences between disciplinary cultures, it is not uncommon to hear practitioners of one field caricature the other; thus, historians reputedly prize accessibility and lucidity above all else, while queer theorists are famous for enunciating their findings with impenetrable density and sometimes playful abstraction. Instances too of queer appropriation of concepts such as the "archive" or "historiography" strike some professionally trained historians as unsettling and pointless. The more urgent concerns are far-reaching, deeply entrenched, and intransigent at the level of modes of analysis, basic foundational assumptions, and stances toward material evidence and the status of truth claims. To some extent that gap will never be narrowed because there are "indispensable" elements in the practice of history that some queer practitioners will not countenance, such as the importance of "factual knowledge" not merely "about events but, however problematically, on more structural and comprehensive levels, such as narration, interpretation, and analysis" (LaCapra 2007:166). Needless to say, locating points of connection is hardly straightforward. Initiating cross-disciplinary discussion starts with an awareness that historical practices (or the practices of historically minded literary and cultural critics) informed by "the cultural politics of recognition"—in this case, sexual identity—must discern what different practices have to offer, which is another objective of this book in its attentiveness to use value (Chakrabarty 2007:77).

A helpful preliminary schema in determining the diverse uses of history can be found in the work of political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, who, in accounting for the professionalizing of history in terms of its service to the nation-state, identified two modes that "have nothing whatever in common": the *practical past* (what "most of us carry around with us in our minds and draw on in the performing of our daily tasks") and the *historical past* ("which could be studied scientifically, disinterestedly, as an end in itself and 'for its own sake'" and "possesses little or no value for understanding or explaining the present, and provides no guidelines for acting in the present or foreseeing the future") (Oakeshott 1999:38).⁸ The explanatory force of this differentiation lies *neither* in its characterization of the current state of an academic history that largely welcomes and encourages the incorporation of the experiences of groups previously excluded *nor* in its anticipatory vision of the possibilities of a critical history practice alive to the future. Oakeshott's conceptualization of two kinds of pasts instead elucidates why an old discipline places a high value on professional training

(and remains tacitly invested in what constitutes proper and improper history) and therefore tends to regard politically motivated outsiders with suspicion.

Queer historicist work such as Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010) perfectly exemplifies the tensions between these two pasts in her invocation of "traditional historical inquiry," "history 'proper,'" "historiography," or "official history," which attempts to establish distance between the "historical" and "practical" pasts to mobilize bold reconceptualizations of queerness and to disrupt temporalities and generate "a discontinuous history of its own" (xi–xiii). In an eloquent preface to the volume, Freeman interweaves a close reading of a poem titled "It's a Queer Time," written by the British poet Robert Graves, *during* the First World War. Positioning her critical and political intervention as satisfying the intense queer longings for "becoming-collective-across-time," Freeman interprets the poet-officer's inciting his men to go over the top ("You're charging madly at [the enemy] yelling 'Fag!'"") as indicating the "homophobia necessary to fuel masculine violence" (11, ix). Forging a queer practical past entails confronting how queer lives have "been forgotten, abandoned, discredited, or otherwise effaced," but this is often at the expense of subverting the purposes of the historical past, which can be observed in Freeman's claim that Graves used a 1920s American slang word for the male homosexual rather than, more plausibly, an ancient Gaelic battle cry, adapted by his regiment in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (*Fág a' Bealach*, meaning "clear the way") (Partridge and Beale 1984:823).⁹ What appears as an egregious error within the context of the historical past registers as exhilarating inventiveness in a practical past off-limits to the scholar trained in a disciplinary culture that bears the residual traces of scientific investigation. "Proper history" elevates the status of the fact, advocates the development of techniques, methods, and values to cultivate detachment, and subscribes to the promise that history should teach "no lessons"; its interests are "strictly impersonal, neutral, and in the best cases, objective" (White 2010). In contrast to the purposes of professional historians who alone—as producers of a "historical past"—are qualified to circulate work in approved publications, the practical past is available to anyone because it is "made up of all those memories, illusions, bits of vagrant information, attitudes, and values which the individual or the group summons up as best they can to justify, dignify, excuse, alibi, or make a case for actions to be taken in the prosecution of a life project" (ibid.).

To the delight of some and the annoyance of others, the history of sexuality is a site where these two pasts—the historical and the practical—collide, crisscross, and blur. The difficulty, from the perspective of producers of the historical past, is that queer movements in "that warehouse of archived memories, ideas, dreams, [and] values" are determined by specific political investments, informed by the modern organization of sexuality that predetermines and overdetermines what can be said, asked, thought, or written about the sexual past (ibid.). The queer practical past creates "possibilities of resistance," but its purposes can also impede investigation of sexualities that have vanished without trace. For example, returning to the circulation of sex talk during the war, dangerous talk behind closed doors may have intimated that "something" was going on without differentiating the sexual subject as a "thing." Critical historians seek to know how it was possible to know *in* the past: "not just to tell the past, but to incorporate in that telling the reasons why the past can talk meaningfully to us today"—an interest shared by some queer scholars but realized in ways critical historians might view as limiting in reinscribing the way we know now (Rosenstone 2007:17).

Ancestral and queer genealogies

One way to move forward is to invite lesbian, gay, and queer chroniclers to become as interested in *writing* their histories as in *reflecting* on the foundational premises and assumptions that govern and shape their work.¹⁰ Let me be clear that I recognize the extraordinary degree of critical reflection on questions about the nature of historical evidence in positioning sexualities as either essentialist or socially constructed. Neither is there any doubt that a significant body of scholarly work on the shifting cultural meanings and dissonances of, say, the sexed body, gender, desire, erotic pleasure, love, friendship, or sexual behavior represents one of the field's greatest intellectual achievements. Disentangling the theoretical investments across the genealogical project entails examining the procedures of a historiographical project that remains tethered to the logic of lineage and roots. Genealogy in the sense of bloodline emphasizes the tracing of lines unbroken, as seen in the "genealogically patterned" chronicles of medieval European cultures that were structured "by the principle of hereditary succession" so that "historical figures and events in the past" were presented "as part of one continuous *interrelated* stream of history" (Spiegel 1990:79–80). In a historical practice expressly designed to serve the political interests of ruling families and dynasties, it was not uncommon for chroniclers to invent "mythical ancestors" (*ibid.*). Beginning in the 1970s historians of homosexuality similarly shaped their chronicles in linear fashion to advance their political agendas, some tracing back an essentialized, transcendent, or universal lesbian or gay being and others understanding sexual categories as culturally contingent and historically situated, the project I call ancestral genealogy.¹¹

Ancestral inquiry has often centered on whether the homosexual is defined by acts or identities or whether homosexuality is essential or socially constructed.¹² With roots in political activism and animated by identity politics, ancestral genealogists ask who "hid" their history and characterize their project as a struggle for visibility, a breaking of the silence, an emergence from the shadows, or the desire for community. All are causes to be fiercely defended to preserve its political purpose, as seen in the sometimes acrimonious debates over terminology or the intensive interest in further refining the taxonomies of sexual beings (Faderman 1979:74–76).¹³ In seeking to affirm lesbian and gay existence, some investigators work comfortably with certainty and, in the face of indecipherability, gloss over the features that make little or no sense, highlighting what appears salient. For the ancestral genealogist, the case of Nurse Harley depicted in one newspaper as "an amazing story of a girl's love for another girl"—would be seen as pertaining to modern lesbianism (*Empire News* December 5, 1920). Preoccupied with similitude while keeping the queer messiness of identity at bay, ancestral genealogy has tended to avoid an investigation of the emotional or psychic motivations that have mobilized its fascination with origins, as queer commentators point out.¹⁴ Ancestral genealogy is particularly valuable in rectifying exclusion; locating women such as Knocker, Chisholm, Douglas-Pennant, or Harley within teleological narratives of emergence allows for the further consolidation of individual or collective identities, recovery work that in turn gives voice and presence to sexual minorities otherwise denied entry to the historical record.

Later iterations of the genealogical project deeply influenced by Foucault's *History of Sexuality* largely shifted attention away from the search for origins (essential or socially constructed) toward an equally politicized project: the attempt to *queer* Foucauldian genealogy, which, as I explain in detail in chapter 2, is a tricky maneuver

within the framework of a critical history practice suspicious of “transhistorical continuities” (Halperin 2002:107; Foucault 1976).¹⁵ The preeminent theorist of “queer genealogy” is David Halperin, who, in a theoretically bold move, set in motion a new way to historicize sexuality, as follows:

A genealogical analysis of homosexuality begins with our contemporary notion of homosexuality, incoherent though it may be. . . . [I]t is this incoherence at the core of the modern notion of homosexuality that furnishes the most eloquent indication of the historical accumulation of discontinuous notions that shelter within its specious unity. The genealogist attempts to disaggregate those notions by tracing their separate histories as well as the process of their interrelations, their crossings, and eventually, their unstable convergence in the present day (Halperin 2002:107).

Without question, Halperin’s *method* is as fully committed to “an inquiry into the alterity of the past” as that of any other *critical* historian. Moreover, this attempt to harness the power of a Foucauldian genealogical practice for tracing back a queer subject has been highly effective and deeply influential in activating and animating historicizing markedly different from lesbian and gay practices. Arguably, however, any practice that begins “with our contemporary notion of homosexuality” sutures two definitions of “genealogy” into a single project. Don’t get me wrong—I do think it is possible to write a critical history of the homosexual and homosexuality, but it is a historical narrative that, in the popular realm in modern Britain, starts about the middle of the twentieth century and runs into the early decades of the twenty-first. Hence my interest in positing the efficacy of a *queer* critical history of *modern sexuality* that does not seek to “look for” or “trace back” an idea or being we know about now; as Foucault explains, the critical historian must “produce something that doesn’t yet exist and of which we can have no idea of what it will be” (Foucault 2001:896).

This turn toward queering the sexual past has successfully problematized the search for similarity or continuity (a chief objective of lesbian and gay history) through illustrating the “limited use” of categories of identity “that have often been taken for granted since the 1970s” (Houlbrook 2005:265). Open to plurality and strangeness, practitioners emphasize the need for a dialogue with difference, discontinuity, alterity, and rupture and argue that the discovery of fixed and stable identities cannot be an investigatory end point. In sharp contrast to ancestral genealogy, queer genealogists might read the cultural meaning of the “amazing story of a girl’s love for another girl” as more equivocal and indeterminate.¹⁶ At the same time, queer genealogy’s call for “undoing . . . the straitjacketing of the homo/heterosexual binary” to discern “a more universal as well as diverse effulgence of nonnormative identifications” betrays a lingering conceptual investment in the discursive logic it claims to repudiate and problematize (McCabe 2005:120–121). In effect, embedded in queer genealogy there remain at least some of the impulses and structuring habits of the ancestral, which—provocatively—exposes the potential of one of the most unlikely of alliances in that *both* queer deconstructionists (the scholars most outspoken in their criticism of academic history practices) *and* critical historians are profoundly skeptical of the “resemblances” the queer historian or historicist perceives shimmering “unsteadily and unevenly” on the sexual landscape (Traub 2007:131). For the critical historian—who proceeds with a different set of questions to meet other objectives—those “retrospective identifications . . . are imagined repetitions and repetitions of imagined resemblances” (Scott 2001:284).¹⁷ Despite periodic calls for rapprochement, the critique of queer deconstructionists who regard the historical enterprise as overempirical and

undertheorized has only intensified, with queer history dismissed as teleological in its attempts to account for a deviant sexual past thought coextensive with a lesbian and gay past, as evinced by a continued interest in sexual identity, stable or not (Freccero 2007:487).¹⁸ These tensions and misunderstandings inhibit exchange and point to a need for heightened awareness of how the protocols of disciplinarity challenge an interdisciplinary field practiced both by professional historians who must adhere to strict disciplinary expectations regarding “accuracy, lucidity, and specific detail” and by queer critics who have more freedom in imagining what “history” is and how it works (LaCapra 2007:161).

Enacting new futures

The aim of this exploration of how and why the history of homosexuality is produced, and who it is produced for, is not to spell out how to do it better—there is already excellent work on that topic.¹⁹ Rather, I examine the material lives of a very few and move across a wide historiographical and theoretical terrain to see what lesbian, gay, and queer history has already achieved, staying mindful of the difficulties inherent in practices that reproduce the conditions of the epistemological structure that made sexuality modern. I am troubled by historical investigative work that embarks with a notion of the modern lesbian or homosexual, because I have different questions about the sexual past. What interests me is figuring out how one epistemological structure jostles against another, since my own case studies suggest that the modern organization of sexuality was still evolving in British public culture during the First World War and into the interwar era. The transcripts of courtroom hearings and parliamentary meetings show that while one or two speakers may have been familiar with a modern knowledge of sexuality, others found such talk baffling, as seen in the Allan/Billing case or parliamentary exchanges about the Douglas-Pennant case. If we turn to the past with a primary interest in the nameability or intelligibility of the lesbian or even queer being, it is as if we are sitting in a crowded courtroom amid hundreds of murmuring observers but can hear only one conversation, our attention drifting away when things seem incomprehensible or irrelevant—or perhaps words are so softly spoken that we hear nothing at all. My experiences in the archive forced me to confront a paradox: how was it that the same epistemological structure of sexuality that impelled me to historicize sexuality in the first place also hindered and obscured other ways the “sexual” might have been configured, talked about, and known?

In what follows I want to suggest that making sense of the *modern* sexual past (or discovering the usefulness of the concept of sexuality) may demand at least two historical practices: one structured within the logic of sexological knowledge, with its taxonomies and labels organized in relation to a “normal,” and another organized differently. Before mapping future directions, it is essential to examine current practices inside and out. This is why part 1 splits the genealogical project apart, especially queer genealogy, a hybrid practice that begins (like the ancestral) “with our contemporary notion of homosexuality” to produce “a genealogical understanding of the emergence of (homo)sexuality itself” (Halperin 2002:107). Hybridity is by no means a flaw—after all, the evidentiary base for my case studies was organized around a set of questions more closely related to queer genealogy than to queer critical history. To produce a queer critical history of sexuality entails an attentiveness to purpose in order to make visible how practice itself shapes and reshapes the way we think about the sexual past.

If this book encourages dialogue between scholars with shared interests in the power of queerness-as-method in historicizing the sexual past as well as greater self-

reflexivity in terms of practice and purpose, I will be satisfied. Like the queer genealogist, the queer critical historian, too, is alive to the usefulness of queer methodologies in determining how any historiographical pathway expands or curtails the investigatory range. My speculations—tentative, provisional—relate to the possibilities of new ancillary practices in the history of sexuality forged out of a productive conversation between scholars whose intellectual interests diverge in purpose yet converge in their recognition of history's power to enact new futures.

Notes

*. Deputation of Members of the Douglas-Pennant Committee with Dr. Norwood to the Attorney General (July 31, 1931), 9 and 49. TNA PRO PREM 1/205.

². A vigorous critique of lesbian and gay history appears, for instance, in Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Queer history—indeed, the workings of academic history itself—has been sharply criticized by queer deconstructionists, as discussed later in this book; see especially Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

For introductions to queer theory and queer studies, see Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); William B. Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

At present there is no short introductory volume on critical history, a practice I discuss further in this introduction as well as in later chapters. The historian Joan Scott's explanation provides a useful starting point: critical history "suggests that the point of doing . . . history is to critically engage some conceptual or theoretical or taken-for-granted notion about why things are the way they are, and how they got to be the way they are"; see "Secularism . . . A Really Interesting Problematic: A Conversation with Joan Scott" (March 2010), <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/RitesResponsibilities.JoanWallachScott.TIF.pdf>, accessed September 7, 2011.

See also Joan Scott, "Finding Critical History," in *Becoming Historians*, edited by James M. Banner and John R. Gillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³. Foucault writes: "One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history"; see Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Press, 1980), 117. In "What Is Enlightenment?" Foucault argues for a mode of "historical investigation" of "events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what 'we are doing, thinking, [and] saying'; see Michel Foucault and Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 32–50, especially 46. Finally, in an interview Foucault states that "recourse to history . . . is meaningful to the extent that history serves to show how that-which-is has not always been; that is, that the things which seem most evident to us are always formed in the confluence of encounters and chances, during the course of a precarious and fragile history"; see Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings of Michel Foucault*, edited with an introduction by Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988), 37.

⁴. Deputation of Members of the Douglas-Pennant Committee with Dr. Norwood to the Attorney General (July 31, 1931), 12 and 44. TNA PRO PREM 1/205. The barrister in *Harley v. Carr* spoke of "dirty things" (cf. chapter 5); *Times*, December 3, 1920, 5.

5. Psychoanalysis was, of course, an equally powerful force in the discursive construction of twentieth-century understandings of sexuality and selfhood, gaining influence in Britain in the 1930s. My interest in foregrounding the importance of sexology throughout this book is to highlight its role in shaping the “sexual” as a classificatory project, thus paving the way for the development of what Foucault calls a *reverse discourse*, reclaiming pathologized terms for political purposes; see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (London: Penguin, 1976), 101.
6. Several examples of the methods and concerns of critical history can be found in Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow, eds., *Manifestos for History* (London: Routledge, 2007). See also the online journal *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, <http://www.historyofthepresent.org>, accessed September 3, 2011.
7. See also Chakrabarty’s incisive critique of “the discourse of ‘history’ produced at the institutional site of the university” (particularly its “deep collusion” with “the modernizing narrative[s] of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation-state”) in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 71. Examples of queer specialists who engage with Chakrabarty’s work include Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman; see Lauren Berlant, “Thinking about Feeling Historical,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 1 (2008): 4–9; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
8. These definitions of Oakeshott’s formulations appear in an unpublished paper by Hayden White titled “The Practical Past” (2010). I am grateful to him for sharing this work.
9. In common use today in the ancient sport of road bowling, *Fág a’ bealach* (pronounced Faug on bal och) is well known in Ireland, meaning “leave/get out of/clear/the way.” According to scholar Katherine O’Donnell, the phrase became “the battle cry on the foundation of the Royal Irish Fusiliers when they were mustered in the 1790s to fight against the French with the British,” and was also taken up by other Irish regiments. Personal correspondence with Katherine O’Donnell, November 2011.
10. I use the phrase lesbian, gay, and queer to signal fields concerned with the history of modern homosexuality. Historians of other sexual identities (such as bisexual, trans, or heterosexual) may also find aspects of this study of identity-based history relevant to their interests.
11. See, for example, Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Women’s Press, 1981).
12. For a clear overview of these debates, see “Mary McIntosh and the ‘Homosexual Role,’” in Weeks, *Making Sexual History*, especially 53–74. Also, for a prehistory of the influential work of McIntosh, see Chris Waters’s “The Homosexual as a Social Being in Britain, 1945–1968,” *Journal of British Studies* (forthcoming).
13. Alternatives to *lesbian* include *proto-lesbian* and *lesbian-like*. The former term appears in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 79. The latter was coined in 1990 by historian Judith Bennett to refer to “women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women”; see Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 110. For a sophisticated analysis of the emotional and psychic investments of this mode of lesbian history, see Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially 326–54.
14. See Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*.
15. Pierre Nora also comments on critical history’s “suspicions” of “collective memory,” even suggesting that history’s “true mission” is “to suppress and destroy it”; see Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 9 and 7.

Thanks to Amelia Jones, who clarified the different forms of identity politics in recent queer theoretical interventions, and to Jonathan D. Katz, who shared his ongoing critique of historiography.

¹⁶. For early examples, see Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Jonathan Goldberg, ed., *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁷. Pierre Nora also critiques what he terms “the repetition of the ancestral”; Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 7.

¹⁸. An example of the elision from *lesbian and gay* to *queer* can be seen in Matt Cook’s explanation of “a conceptual separation of family from homosexuality which has tended to inform historical approaches to both male and female queer lives in the past”; see Matt Cook, “Families of Choice? George Ives, Queer Lives, and the Family in Early Twentieth-Century Britain,” *Gender and History* 22, no. 1 (2010): 1. Deborah Cohler, on the other hand, configures queer as a catch-all term for fluid identities that fit uneasily into existing categories; Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer*.

¹⁹. See especially Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*; Valerie Traub, “Making Sexual Knowledge: Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns” (forthcoming).

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Résumé

Cet article explore les effets perturbants de la Première Guerre mondiale sur la vie des femmes en Grande-Bretagne dans le but de soutenir que l'accès que nous avons au terrain complexe de la sexualité a été défini par la résistance du projet généalogique du point de vue de l'histoire lesbienne, gay et queer qui a émergé suite aux politiques de libération des années 1970 et, plus tard, à l'analyse foucauldienne de la connaissance et du pouvoir. La généalogie en tant que métaphore organisatrice a contribué à élargir l'étendue du passé sexuel, en retraçant des ascendances tenant à la fois de la similitude et de la rupture. Or, beaucoup plus reste à explorer. Malgré l'interrogation de la théorie queer quant à l'identité, la généalogie catégorise toujours l'expérience humaine suivant qu'elle est normale ou déviante. Ce projet révèle que les communautés et désirs des femmes anglo-américaines qui ont exploité les perturbations sociales de la Première Guerre mondiale constituent un terrain idéal pour repenser les moyens d'historiser la sexualité en relation avec le genre, la race, la nation et la classe sociale. Ce tournant culturel met l'accent sur certains des problèmes qui remettent actuellement en question les méthodes de recherche prédominantes dans le domaine de l'histoire de l'identité, et permet d'imaginer comment la sexualité pourrait être étudiée différemment.

Resumen

Este artículo mira a los efectos perturbadores que la Primera Guerra Mundial tuvo en la vida de las mujeres en Gran Bretaña y argumenta que nuestro acceso a los complejos ámbitos de la sexualidad han sido circunscritos por la resiliencia en la historia lésbica, gay y queer del proyecto genealógico que surgió en la liberación política de los 1970s y, más tarde del análisis Foucaultiano sobre conocimiento y poder. Como una metáfora organizadora, la genealogía ha sido importante en ampliar el alcance del pasado sexual, rastreando ancestros tanto de similitudes como de rupturas, pero al mismo aún hay mucho que obstruye. A pesar de las

interrogaciones sobre identidad de la teoría queer, la genealogía continúa caracterizando la experiencia humana como normativa o desviada. Para repensar caminos disponibles en historizar la sexualidad en relación a género, raza, nación y clase, este proyecto descubre un lugar especial en los deseos y comunidades de mujeres Anglo-Americanas, que explotaron las disrupciones sociales de la Primera Guerra Mundial. Este momento cultural enfatiza algunos de los problemas que actualmente irrita el modo dominante de la investigación histórica y permite imaginar cómo la sexualidad podría ser estudiada en forma diferente.