

Post-colonial historiography, queer historiography

The political spaces of history writing

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SUMMARY: If sexuality as a category of historical analysis is widely acknowledged as "socially constructed" over time and place, why are historians still assuming a core set of essential qualities that unite all those scholarships they categorize under "gay and lesbian history" or "queer history"? This short position essay responds to this striking paradox in queer historiography by turning to post-colonial historiography. In doing so, it proposes the use of the historical project as an intellectual tool that challenges the discursive constructions of objects of knowledge through different historiographies (e.g., Marxism, modernism, etc.). In this attempt, the queer historical subject is conceptualized as comprising shifting historical positions under which their historical representations function as sites of contest and possibility.

Opening up the archive of queer historiography, one immediately

confronts a striking paradox: for if so many historians acknowledge the "social construction" of (homo)sexuality, how come a body of literature called "gay and lesbian history" or "queer history" still exists? Alternatively put, if sexuality is indeed widely recognized as "socially constructed" across time and place, why are historians still assuming a core set of essential qualities that unite all those historical scholarships they categorize under "gay and lesbian history" or "queer history," or even the "history of sexuality" for that matter? In this brief position paper, which is derivative of a longer article in progress, I want to respond to this apparent contradiction by turning to the Subaltern Studies project and post-colonial historiography. I will appropriate that understanding of a historical subject in subaltern and post-colonial studies that I have found most useful for my concerns about the essentializing tendencies of queer historiography.[1]

Learning from the debates in post-colonial history, I hope to demonstrate that rather than characterizing the often disenfranchised historical subjects-such as of the subaltern group, of the queer community, or of the third world-as subjects whose "invisible" voices of the past need to be recuperated, it is more useful to think of them as comprising shifting historical positions under which their historical representations thus function as emerging sites of contest and possibility.

Let me begin with Gayatri Spivak's defense of a deconstructionist reading of the Subaltern Studies project in her important essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography". Refusing to describe the major agenda of the Subaltern Studies collective as merely combating elitist historiography by granting a unitary voice to the subaltern historical figure, Spivak argues that it would be more appropriate to view the role of the subaltern historian as documenting and providing examples of various "discursive displacements" that challenge not only the dominant Colonial discourse-the grand narrative of the West-but also the inherently problematic homogeneity of the historical status of the de-privileged subaltern group (197). Moreover, these "discursive displacements" would simultaneously effect discontinuities between the privileged and subordinated subject-positions, rendering a consistent and stable conceptualization of their relationship untenable.

According to Spivak, "If we look at the varieties of activity treated by [the Subaltern Studies collective], subaltern, insurgent, nationalist, colonialist, historiographic, it is a general field of failures that we see. In fact the work of the collective is making the distinction between success and failure indeterminate" (200). On the next page, Spivak succinctly concludes that "The group's own practice can then be graphed on this grid of 'failures'" (201). In this sense, Spivak brings

the Subaltern Studies project onto a terrain of historical and historiographical interventions beyond the simple task of recuperating the subaltern past. Through the recognition and participation of a grid of "failures" in various histories and historiographies-of modernism, Marxism, nationalism, colonialism, feminism, among others-representations of the subaltern, as both the object and the subject of historical interpretation, "undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and 'situate' the effect of the subject as subaltern" in varying historical investigations, thus demonstrating that "the essentializing moment, the object of their criticism, is irreducible" (205).

Similarly, Gyan Prakash considers the task of writing histories of the third world as a critical engagement with producing a form of historical writing that is not founded in some identity-individual, class, or structure. In line with Spivak, who discusses the "*strategic* use of positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (205), Prakash insists that to treat the third world as a viable category of historical study does not necessarily invoke an irreducible, fixed object. Rather, a strategic use of the analytic category of the third world

requires the rejection of those modes of thinking which configure the third world in such irreducible essences as religiosity,

underdevelopment, poverty, nationhood, non-Westerness...This disruption makes it possible to treat the third world as a variety of shifting positions which have been discursively articulated in history. Viewed in this manner, the Orientalist, nationalist, Marxist and other historiographies become visible as discursive attempts to constitute their objects of knowledge, that is, the third world (Prakash 163-164).

In other words, far from being compartmentalized in a concealed geographical space, the third world as formed in and through the historical project declares critical affiliations and undeniable relationships with the first world. Correspondingly, the third world's "third-worldedness," which comprises historiographical fragmentations and ruptures, penetrates and reworks the first world's comfortable imagination and subordination of the third world. Even though third world members, like the Orientalist and the subaltern, can never "speak"-because the moment they "speak" they reify the very discursive framework of Colonial discourse and Western domination that initially produced their epistemological standpoint [2]-the third world, according to Prakash's analysis, emerges as a series of historical processes that cuts across specific identities, relying on their contingent (re)constructions and (re)articulations. Indeed, writing histories of the third world moves us beyond the essentialism versus social constructionism debate

over identity categories, because it forces us to think in terms of larger historiographical politics and, accordingly, find benefits from the debate itself in constructing alternative visions of the relationship between the past, the present, and the future.[3]

Like the task of writing third world histories, the rapid growth of U. S. lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) histories since the 1980s has furnished an unprecedented and complicated set of historiographical politics around the distinction between a "national" framework and the "local" narratives it generated.[4] Historian Marc Stein, for instance, has recently reflected on several definitive works in LGBT history-including John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1983), Elizabeth L. Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993), Esther Newton's *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* (1993), George Chauncey's *Gay New York* (1994), John Howard's *Men Like That* (1999), Marc Stein's *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves* (2000), Peter Boag's *Same-Sex Affairs* (2003), and Nan Boyd's *Wide Open Town* (2003)-and has commented on this making of American queer historiography in a review essay: "Since 1983 U.S. LGBT historical scholarship...has developed into multiple directions, but much of it has taken the form of local studies that respond to D'Emilio's national narrative" ("Theoretical Politics" 607). At the same time, Stein observes that the emergence of queer

historiography based on local analyses "ha[s] led to hyperbolic claims about which were the queerest places and which the most challenging for queers (and, by extension, queer researchers). Moreover, professional pressures to demonstrate national significance have encouraged premature pronouncements about the typical, atypical, or prototypical aspects of local phenomena" ("Theoretical Politics" 608).[5]

These tensions and conflicts among local histories suggest that "queer" historical subjects should not simply be seen as people of the past occupying the same position in a grand historical narrative that need to be recovered. Instead, much like the de-privileged subaltern and the (previously) colonized third world, queer identities are generated from, constructed through, mapped with, and documented in shifting historical positions that function as potential sites of historiographical interrogation, both internally, as demonstrated by Stein, and externally, for which I will provide an example here. Afsaneh Najmabadi's recent important contribution that moves beyond U.S. LGBT history, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, reminds us that even within the last two centuries, non-Western parts of the world had undergone changes in the social and cultural patterns of gender and sexual normativities in ways significantly different from the changes in the West. Najmabadi shows that in early Qajar Iran (1785-1925), standards of

beauty were not gender-specific: male youths ("amrads") as well as women were both deemed beautiful and sexually desirable by adult men, who were distinguished from the amrads by the marker of a full beard. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, love and erotic attraction became heterosexualized: beauty was now associated only with female femininity, while acceptable notions of male beauty and male same-sex love gradually disappeared. According to Najmabadi's post-colonialist critique, the modernist effort to erase the amrad-the male object of desire-from the recent Iranian past in part could be attributed to the increasingly intensified interactions between Iranian and European men in the nineteenth century.

That the modern Middle East historical grand narrative of sexuality does not correspond so neatly to the well-documented Western historical grand narrative of sexuality, according to which a psychologized notion of (homo)sexual subjectivity distinctly emerged from the late nineteenth-century medical discourse,[6] reveals the different genealogical forces that were at work to render queer historical subjects queer toward the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Whereas European culture had directly reoriented the social meanings of non-Western people's gender and erotic orientation, historical actors of the West did not experience the same kind of "cultural imperialism," so to speak. These different visions of queerness and its diverging modes of

cognizance and realization in the relationship between the past, the present, and even the future enable us to conceive of the object of historical investigation as inherently representing multiple sites of contest and possibility, the excavation of which could be done through various ways of history writing with different historiographical themes. In short, carrying its internal and external incoherencies, and mirroring its post-colonial counterpart as described earlier, the unstable queer historical subject operates with unfixed visibilities and contingent meanings in the discursive history of its own history.

Although there are a small number of scholarly volumes that explore the intersections between post-colonial theory and queer theory, it appears that no one-historians included-has addressed the advantages of demonstrating the conceptual overlaps between post-colonial *historiography* and queer *historiography*. [7] I hope to have taken the first step in doing so by showing that the troubling issue with queer historiography is not its tendency to essentialize its object of investigation, but those attempts to "colonize" queer historiography by imagining and assigning to it a reducible intellectual significance.

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[1] I should mention from the outset that in this paper I do not attempt to engage with the essentialism-versus-social constructionism debate, at least not explicitly. Rather, the goal here is to conceptualize the queer historical subject in terms of "historiographical politics," by which I mean the way systems of power relations get interrogated by using the historical project as an intellectual tool that challenges the discursive constructions of objects of knowledge through different historiographies (e.g., Marxism, nationalism, colonialism, modernism, etc.). The concrete

political status of the objects of knowledge, in other words, is also "problematized" as a result of disrupting these various historiographic attempts. For an early defense of the social constructionism position, which illuminates the entire essentialism versus social constructionism debate remarkably well, see Halperin 41-53.

[2] See, for example, Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak's goal in this seminal piece, other than demonstrating that the subaltern cannot speak, is to show that even the works of influential post-structuralist thinkers, like Foucault, are marked by obvious "blind spots," most notably those that overlook notions of imperial domination.

[3] See n. 1 for my definition of "historiographical politics."

[4] By "national framework," as the following quotation that I cite from Marc Stein's historiographical essay will indicate, I am referring to the framework set up by John D'Emilio's landmark historical study of the emergence of the modern gay and lesbian movement. See his *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. By "local narratives," I am referring to other studies like the works mentioned in the following sentence. See Kennedy and Davis; Newton; Chauncey; Howard; Stein, *City*; Boag; and Boyd.

[5] One could argue that Marc Stein's generalizations are more applicable to studies in gay and lesbian history than the history of bisexuality and transsexuality. Consider, for example, Angelides; and Meyerowitz. On the other hand, at the time that I am crafting this position paper, the most recent addition to American queer historiography is a local study of queer life in the history of Los Angeles. See Faderman and Timmons.

[6] See, for example, Foucault; Terry; and Davidson.

[7] On the intersections between post-colonial theory and queer theory, see, for example, Hawley, ed., *Postcolonial and Queer Theories*, and ed., *Postcolonial, Queer*.

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