

Queer 1950s, Rethinking Sexuality in the Postwar Years

Edited by Heike Bauer & Matt Cook, Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan 2012.

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Over the last 10 years or so the artist Paul Harfleet has been engaged in *The Pansy Project*. This art project entails planting a pansy at the site of historical or recent public homophobic abuse, photographing the flower and naming the image after the abuse that was experienced there. This act of remembrance and reorientation is similar to the impulse of the volume *Queer 1950s* which seeks to look to the decade and mark where non-normative sexualities and identities existed, and in places flourished, in what is more often seen as a era of repression and secrecy. Indeed as Chris Brickell notes in an essay on New Zealand in the volume:

We must not ignore the legal strictures and the restrictive attitudes of this small society, but still, gaily-coloured flowers managed to grow among the cracks in the social pavement (Brickell in Bauer & Cook, 2012:110).

This wide-ranging collection of essays explores fine-grained narratives of queer and other non-normative identities, with an eye in particular to international perspectives. In spirit it follows a vein of work in queer theory that has looked to time and temporalities as a way of thinking about how time normalises certain identities, and also the work of queer time and temporalities has been to excavate queers in the past, but to do so in a way that both troubles our current sense of subjectivity and normative visions of time itself. In particular, the work of Judith/Jack Halberstam (2005) and Elizabeth Freeman (2010) have been influential in this field, but it is the work of Heather Love, particularly her work *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) that can be felt most strongly through the collection. This look to the normalising actions of history when it comes to expressions of non-normative sexuality and identity is on the one hand about finding others in the past. On the other hand the process of looking for queers in the past should resist the urge to essentialise them, that is, to look to past queernesses as if they are like present queernesses. Rather, this line of thinking goes, we should allow the ways that queers existed in the past to trouble how we might think of queernesses in the present.

Thus the essays in this volume look to historical detail to see how queers existed and thrived in the 1950s. It does this not only with the familiar Anglo-American perspective but also includes works from other parts of the world whose local histo-

ries developed in specific ways. Thus the volume adds a much-needed international perspective to the discussion of queernesses as they have developed in specific geographic, political and historical places.

The book is structured in three parts, named 'Representing', 'Living' and 'Thinking'. It starts with close readings of images of specific photographs, films and popular newspapers. The essays show through personal images how groups of queers lived outside the kinds of identities found in popular public images in newspapers. The section also highlights how the public presentation of some specific films also present queers in a latent fashion – as to show queers directly may have led to a particular set of consequences. The section, in a detailed way shows how queers survived in a context where the public discourses of homosexuality were prohibitive and salacious.

In the section 'Living', the essays focus less on representation but look to how people with non-normative sexualities actually lived in the decade. This section highlights with a good level of detail the strategies for living in a context that from this end of history looks very difficult indeed. What all the essays in this section do is present a re-reading of what is a popular and extant thought about the contexts that the writers discuss. That is, the writers investigate the experiences of a continuity of identity in the historical: for instance how US lesbians lived queerly and what strategies for survival and thriving they used; how rural Finnish religious communities enabled queer sexualities; how bright queer communities existed in New Zealand at a time that is popularly imaged as grey and ruled by conservatism; and how the domestic management strategies of two men in a same-sex relationship in a street in a working class London, reveal the workings of class in relation to long term partnerships in the 1950s.

The final section 'Thinking' looks to scientific and critical thinking as it appeared in the 1950s. Authors in this section argue for the importance of the discourses at this time as a way of re-envisioning queernesses in the 1950s. Such discussion illuminates through readings of early sexology (both in its scientific and popular forms), newspaper columns and stories, and government committees, the antecedents of a more socially liberal era, the popular vision of which almost always points to the late 1960s. This last point is the main thrust of the book and is an argument made clearly and strongly.

Thus, the book shows through historical detail in representations, lived experience and discourses of early sexology that in the 1950s we might find queernesses that reflect a sense of the continuation of particular identities (lesbian, gay) and that also trouble us. The very last chapter sits rather oddly in the collection; it is a chapter that follows queer theory's recent impulse to look to material bodies (in this case bodies in 'freak shows' in the 1950s). Such visions of the past like the 'freak show' trouble us and the inclusion of the essay functions to leave the discussion unsettled and unsettling, in part because discourses of queer/crip are current and in part because the essay looks to the way that the 'freak show' form is being reused/reformed/transformed in places on the current performance scene. Thus the chapter sitting rather oddly serves to upset a neat closing off of the argument because it indicates the other work yet to do.

The strength of the volume is in its attention to material detail, which throws up alternative narratives about the 1950s from an international perspective. The direction of the book then is to present counter discourses to prevailing ideas about what the 1950s did with queernesses by looking to actual instances, images, discourses, testimony and oral history to secure a sense that in the 1950s queernesses did indeed exist in various forms. The inclusion of works focussed internationally makes this collection particularly useful and strong as these perspectives resist the urge to look for sameness in the historical record. Rather what they do is present a number of perspectives that show how queernesses developed in uneven ways in diverse places. Thus, a look to find a solid lineage of queerness is to stamp a current vision on the past, a vision that might not allow the subject the wiggle room the idea of queerness implies.

Initially it seems odd that the structure of the book ends with unpacking overarching discourses of sexology (often this discussion comes first, to set the tone, range and lexicon of a book). Rather, starting with readings of images and then moving on to discussing ways of living rooted in evidence has an interesting affect. Because, for instance, the reader is aware that a negative headline about lesbianism/homosexuality might indeed positively connect a person in the 1950s to a community about which she/he was not aware, by the time the discussions about discourses of sexology appear in the final part of the book, the reader has very firmly in mind the counter-narratives and material realities of lived experience of the period. In this way in the final section where larger sexological and political discourses are discussed there is a clear sense of the material and subject agency that might help the reader queerly look at what appear to be discourses that describe a reality as a set of discourses in some senses constructing the reality they describe.

Although I found myself wanting a bit more of an introduction, one which perhaps played more fully with ideas of time and in particularly articulated Heather Love's ideas as clearly as it has historical detail, this book is satisfying and coherent. It is useful for specific histories that resist dominant popular narratives about the 1950s, and it is also a very useful set of discussions that show these resistances from several geographic perspectives. The work in the book serves in some ways as testament to material resistive strategies for surviving and thriving in straightened times. And although I think the image of a pansy perhaps rather too delicate to reflect the stoicism and bravery (and in some places, plain ordinariness) of queers past, these essays serve to describe flashes of brightness that disrupt the smooth flow of a view that sees queers as only ever guiltily repressed in the 1950s.

References

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