Queer Theory and Critical History, Together At Last

Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women’s Experience of Modern War

By Laura Doan

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Reviewed by Martha Vicinus

This is a major book that undertakes the difficult tasks of summarizing current work in the field of lesbian/queer history and suggesting directions for future work. Laura Doan’s Disturbing Practices joins Sharon Marcus’s Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England (2007) and Margot Canaday’s The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America (2009) in using close readings of literary and legal texts, popular culture, and newspaper to develop a fresh approach toward interpreting same-sex erotics.

The first half of Disturbing Practices is a series of tactful analyses of major contributors to the field of lesbian studies over the past thirty years, while the second half, focusing on World War I, provides examples of how a new approach, combining queer theory and critical history, might work. Although written in beautifully lucid academic prose, it is not an easy read, as Doan negotiates a generation of lively critical debate, some of which is bound to feel dated, overheated, or overtheorized. The book should be required reading, however, for anyone interested in how same-sex love has been understood today and in the past.

Doan repeatedly reminds us of how much we owe the pioneering historians of the 1970s, eighties, and beyond who have searched the past for identifiable lesbians. At the same time, she acknowledges and celebrates the intervention of queer theory, which called into question the notion of a “true self” waiting to be discovered. Previously, identity-based history had assumed that the sexual self was both knowable and visible, if only one looked hard enough. By problematizing identity, queer theorists opened a new, provocative approach to the historical past. As Doan notes, “[W]e can never forget that it is the queer researcher who constructs, rather than discovers the past.” Queer history is a dialogue with the past rather than an excavation of forgotten heroines or events; it foregrounds the differences between how we think about sexual behaviors and how people in the past thought about them. For example, if sexual activity is defined as penetrative, then kissing and fondling between women may be seen as training for “the real thing” or simply as affective teasing. Or as something entirely different.

Even as Doan acknowledges the important breakthrough of queer theory, she argues for the similarities between these two approaches to the past. She labels identity-seeking historians creators of “ancestral genealogies” and queer historians creators of “queer genealogies.” For her, one form of history writing does not supersede another; rather, different approaches to the past co-exist. Both perform important tasks. The ancestral historians scour the past for homosexual acts or identities, recuperating a hidden history; by making this past visible to us now, they serve the important political goal of affirming the long-standing existence of same-sex love. Queer theorists, in turn, seek to create a genealogy of feeling, privileging the queer author’s emotional connection with specific people or events in the past. For example, queer medievalists speak of feeling the erotic touch of the past, in spite of, or because of, the fragmentary evidence with which they must work.

For Doan, queer theorists fail to make a distinction between queer lives (queerness-as-being) and queerness in the past (queerness-as-method). I would add that acknowledging one’s own queerness (queerness-as-author) does not necessarily yield a queer past, or even a past that resonates with the present. Doan finds that queer historians have too easily stigmatized traditional history as empirically based, confusing the writing of history by trained historians with such outdated beliefs that facts can speak for themselves or that history controls social and cultural phenomena. In turn, as she notes, even the most theoretically attuned (nonqueer) historians have mostly cordoned off sexuality studies.

Doan proposes a solution to this impasse: queer theorists and critical historians need to learn from each other. Addressing queer theorists, she suggests much greater use of what she calls “queer critical history,” an approach that acknowledges, even embraces, the contingent nature of history writing. She calls attention to the profound changes in the field of history over the past thirty years, following the so-called “cultural turn” of the 1980s. In a sweeping move, “critical historians” came to question the status of evidence, of so-called facts, and of historical reality itself—a task that queer theorists were undertaking at the same time. These critical historians accepted the constructed nature of their project: all history, they argued, is a partial recreation of the past, written under circumstances that inevitably reflect present-day concerns and questions.

Just as Doan calls on queer theorists to embrace these changes in history writing, she asks that critical historians acknowledge the queer critique of empiricist history. She is puzzled as to why historians are not more receptive to the queer criticism of history. She laments the fact that sexuality studies remain a subfield in history rather than a crucial category for historical analysis. Sexuality, unlike race or gender, is most often seen in terms of identity, rather than power. For
most historians, it is a category tied to a specific political moment, an analytical framework that queer theory should have dislodged, but has not. Doan proposes that critical historians use queer theory to illuminate “aspects of the sexual past that resist explanation,” and that this can “position sexuality as an essential concept in historical work.”

In the book’s second half, Doan sets herself the task of bringing together the insights and methodologies of both critical historians and queer theorists. She suggests that queer history practices can move lesbian/queer studies away from the genealogical and toward a more fluid, more provisional notion of how same-sex behaviors were understood in the past. Some readers will be frustrated by Doan’s principled refusal to reach any conclusions in her case studies, but surely most will find exhilarating her effort to write a queer critical history.

Focusing on women who took nontraditional jobs during World War I, she argues that the war did not dislodge traditional beliefs about female behavior nor was it a watershed moment in the history of sexuality. Her meticulous research reveals instead a series of overlapping definitions, words, and categories for sexual behaviors; indeed, conflicting definitions of what constitutes normal or normative sexuality is a key subject in these chapters. Underlying her documentation is the argument that categories of sexual behavior could be unknown, partially defined, contradictory, or silenced.

Category confusion describes the response of the Hon. Violet Blanche Douglas-Pennant (1869 – 1945) to her abrupt firing, toward the end of World War I, from her position as the leader of the Women’s Royal Air Force (WRAF). At a time when she was investigating heterosexual irregularities between WRAF members and male officers, secret charges were made about her own sexual proclivities. Douglas-Pennant spent the remainder of her life fighting her dismissal, arguing that she had lost her job because of “secret and false allegations made against her ‘moral character’.” In 1918 her formal protest was dismissed, but in 1931 her friends successfully appealed to Sir William Jowitt, the attorney general, to reopen the case. Jowitt, speaking in very modern terms, asked for “real evidence” that someone had called Douglas-Pennant a lesbian. But Douglas-Pennant and her friends had framed her firing in terms of the defamation of her moral character, not in terms of specific sexual acts or identities; thus, they could not supply such evidence. As Doan notes, for more than twenty years, Douglas-Pennant never spoke openly or explicitly about the accusations against her beyond vague references to the sexual; she believed she was the victim of pernicious gossip and was “ignorant or utterly unaware of her ‘self’ as a sexual being.” Interestingly, in oral interviews in the 1960s, two members of the WRAF used names and categories from the 1960s to describe the unit’s sexual atmosphere, saying they’d known numerous “lesbians”—a word never used publicly during or immediately after the war.

In her chapter on Douglas-Pennant, Doan carefully dissects the available options—in 1918, 1931, the 1960s, and today—tracing the very different ways in which sex, sexual behavior, and sexual identity were or were not known, and were or were not talked about. Names and naming could not resolve Douglas-Pennant’s case, nor could they help Jowitt, much less a historian, to understand it. Doan considers her discussion to be “an exploration of what different questions or problems emerge in the refusal to name or the unavailability of naming.” Quoting the historian Joan Kelly, she suggests “the value of a critical history practice interested in producing ‘an undetermined history.’”

This chapter is the highlight of the book for me. Doan’s careful research shows time and again how uneven sexual knowledge was and can be, and how the process of self-naming is rare and sometimes a matter of hind sight. Moreover, who can say whether current categories of sexual knowledge are better or more accurate than those used in the past?

Doan documents how social class, distinguished war service, or a good barrister often trumped questions of sexual behavior. As the “mother” of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, pointed out years ago, we all embody many conflicting beliefs and identities. Douglas-Pennant and her allies could speak of her aristocratic noblesse oblige, her distinguished philanthropic record, and her moral and religious conduct, but not of her possible sexual identity.

It will be interesting to see what happens to Doan’s plea that queer theorists and critical historians listen to each other, and whether sexuality itself will become a major marker for the study of the past. I remember the distinct discomfort of some of my male colleagues with my research into nineteenth and early twentieth-century homosexual marriage has led to a renewed interest in the history of marriage here in the US and in other countries. The powerful social, religious, and economic institution of marriage has brought same-sex practices to center stage in ways that surely could not have been predicted twenty years ago. New and old definitions of marriage compete. Seemingly immutable religious practices and scientific classifications have undergone radical changes in a remarkably short time, yet former beliefs survive. Current sexual categories may well come to be seen as obsolete, even as many of us hang on to them. Twenty years from now, historians may see sexuality as a crucial category for study because it has become a major political issue. Disturbing Practices reminds us of just how historically contingent categories and institutions are, and how complex and contradictory our own thinking may be.

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