

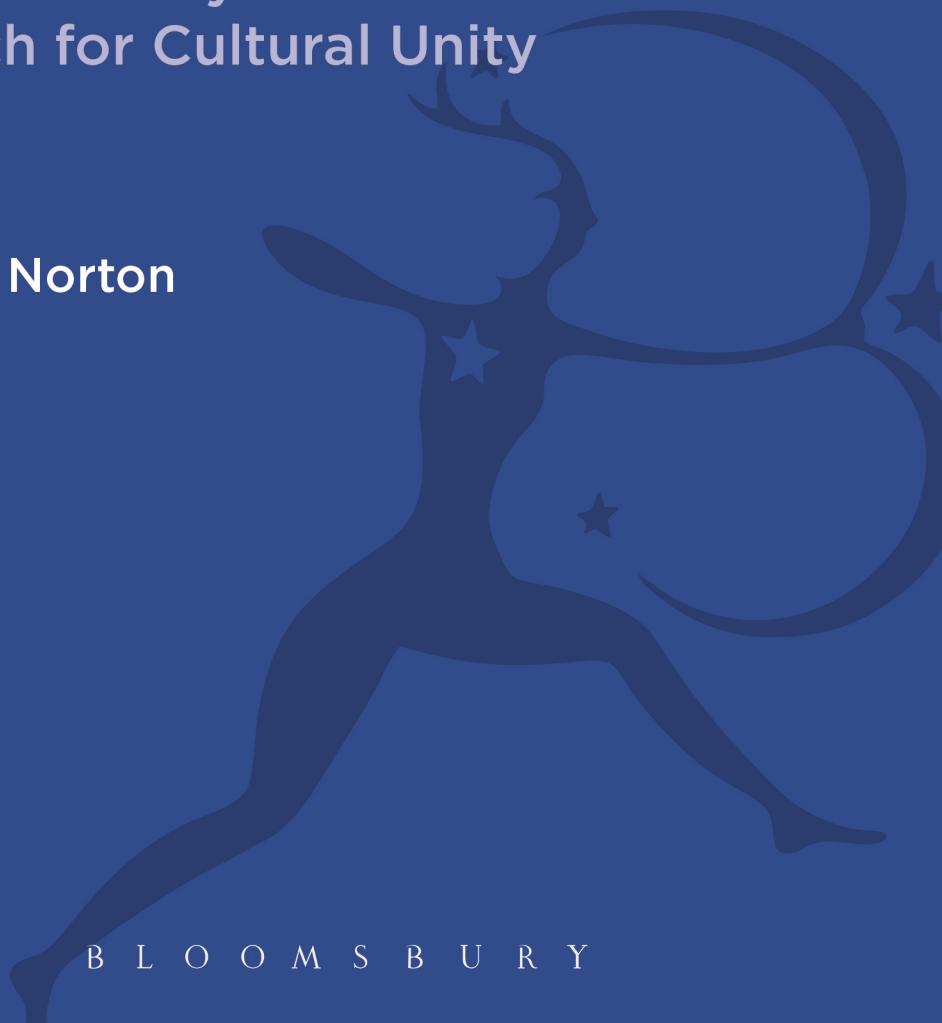


BLOOMSBURY
ACADEMIC COLLECTIONS
GENDER STUDIES

MYTH OF THE MODERN HOMOSEXUAL

Queer History and the
Search for Cultural Unity

Rictor Norton



B L O O M S B U R Y

Myth of the Modern Homosexual

Gender Studies: Bloomsbury Academic Collections

These nine books, reprinted as facsimile editions, from our imprints The Athlone Press, Cassell and Continuum cover a range of aspects of studies on gender and sexuality. Spanning from the representation of homosexuality in literature to the way we perceive and teach gender, from the hidden lives of lesbians and gays in the past to the study of transgender people, this collection offers a wide-ranging perspective on gender and sexuality studies.

The collection is available both in e-book and print versions.

Other titles available in Gender Studies include:

Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians, Emily Hamer

Gendernaps: Social Constructionism, Feminism and Sexosophical History, John Money

Homosexuality and Literature: 1890-1930, Jeffrey Meyers

Portraits to the Wall: Historic Lesbian Lives Unveiled, Rose Collis

Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siècle, edited by Kate More and Stephen Whittle

Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India, Giti Thadani

Seduced and Abandoned: Essays on Gay Men and Popular Music, Richard Smith

What is She Like: Lesbian Identities from the 1950s to the 1990s, Rosa Ainley

Myth of the Modern Homosexual

Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity

Rictor Norton

Gender Studies

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC COLLECTIONS

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in 1997 by Cassell

This edition published by Bloomsbury Academic 2016

© Rictor Norton 2016

Rictor Norton has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4742-8693-0
ePDF: 978-1-4742-8692-3
Set: 978-1-4742-8075-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Series: Bloomsbury Academic Collections, ISSN 2051-0012

Printed and bound in Great Britain

The Myth of the Modern Homosexual

The Myth of the Modern Homosexual

Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity

Rictor Norton



CASELL

London and Washington

Cassell
Wellington House
125 Strand
London WC2R 0BB
PO Box 605
Herndon
Virginia 20172

© Rictor Norton 1997

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

First published 1997

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Norton, Rictor, 1945–

The myth of the modern homosexual: queer history and the search for cultural unity/Rictor Norton.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-304-33891-5—ISBN 0-304-33892-3 (pbk.)

1. Homosexuality, Male—History. 2. Gays—History.
3. Homosexuality—History. I. Title.

HO76.25.N67 1997

306.76'62'09—dc21

97-7785
CIP

ISBN 0 304 33891 5 (hardback)

0 304 33892 3 (paperback)

Designed and typeset by Ben Cracknell Studios
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd,
Guildford and King's Lynn

Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Part One: Social Constructionism and Other Myths	
1. The Search for Cultural Unity	3
2. Queer BC (Before Constructionism)	34
3. The Myth of the Modern Homosexual	61
4. It's Just a Phrase We're Going Through	98
Part Two: The Nature of Queer History	
5. What Is Queer History?	127
6. The Evidence of Things Not Seen	148
7. Lesbian Historiography	180
Part Three: Queer Culture	
8. The Great Queens of History	215
9. Queer (Sub)cultures	239
10. Queer Folk and Culture Queens	267
References	293
Index	303

Preface

When I read *A Queer Reader* (Higgins, 1993) I was amused to find myself quoted for having once said:

to be honest, gay persons are not just plain folk, we are quite extraordinary. ... We are not – heaven forbid – ‘the same as’ heterosexuals, but are uniquely different with our own positive and lasting contributions to humanity. Some of us are pederasts. Some of us are sado-masochists. Some of us are hustlers. Some of us are frenzied fairies in drag. In other words: we have amongst our ranks – in our culture – a wealth and variety of collectively liberating experience undreamt of by merely mortal heterosexuals. We are Hamlet and his father in heaven and hell, while they are Horatio with his plodding commonsense.

The excerpt was headed ‘Superior Persons’, though my own more abstruse title was ‘The Phoenix of Sodom’. The words came from an article I wrote for *Gay News* in 1974, shortly after joining the full-time staff of the fortnightly newspaper, as an explanation of why I researched gay history and early gay literature. I reread the article as I worked on this present book to see if I still felt the same twenty years later. Some of the ‘revolutionary’ rhetoric is rather embarrassing today, but my ideal of the queer historian remains the same: to liberate gay pride by liberating queer history and queer culture from that secret closet to which heterosexual history had consigned them; to celebrate the uniqueness and diversity of gay peoples rather than presenting them as just plain folk; to challenge the notion that the features of queer culture throughout history are little more than symptoms of pathological oppression, internalized guilt, repression or sublimation. I saw then, and I see today, ‘the dilemma of integrating our liberation with our own culture. The less radical part of the gay liberation movement, as it exhibits itself in the public forum, is not so much political as politic ... nearly all of the programmes for “our” gay liberation (manifestos, gay organizations, gay conferences, etc.) seem to imply that we will be liberated only by freeing ourselves *from* our own gay culture rather than by freeing ourselves *for* our own gay culture.’

PREFACE

Queer historians do have a role to play in ensuring that the revelation of a person's queer sexuality comes to be seen as neither abnormal nor infamous, but I think it is mistaken to argue that we are 'virtually normal' and have no history except as victims or activists.

Rictor Norton
January 1997

Acknowledgements

A work of this nature could not have been written without the aid of the comprehensive articles in the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (Dynes, 1990), to which I am deeply indebted.

For help in collecting the illustrations I would like to thank the staff of the British Library and the Museo del Prado; Pat Sewell, Principal District Archivist, Calderdale District Archives; Andy Chopping, Museum of London Archaeology Service; and Greg Reeder for sending me photographs of the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep. I am especially grateful to Keith Cavers for several helpful discussions concerning the nature of visual evidence, and for allowing me to publish a number of illustrations from his extensive collection of material on the history of drag queens and persons of the third sex.

Part I

Social Constructionism and Other Myths

The Search for Cultural Unity

Many of the early gay liberationists – like most activists in nationalist and ethnic movements – believed, I think correctly, that knowledge of history plays an important role in the development of solidarity: a consciousness of cultural community provides the necessary strength for collective action to overcome oppression. Jonathan Katz's *Coming Out: A Documentary Play about Gay Life and Liberation in the United States of America* (1975) uses some two dozen significant moments in American gay history to promote enthusiasm for the struggle, including the 'Boys of Boise' witch-hunt, the Stonewall riots, notable raids and trials in Chicago and New York, and vignettes of Horatio Alger, Willa Cather, Allen Ginsberg, Gertrude Stein and Walt Whitman. Gay heritage also formed the basis of one of the earliest pieces of agitprop performed by the Gay Sweatshop theatre company in London in 1976. *As Time Goes By*, by Noel Greig and Drew Griffiths, contains European queer-cultural set pieces, including the male brothel of the Cleveland Street Scandal in the 1890s, Edward Carpenter and George Merrill at home in Millthorpe, and a scene in which two drag entertainers sing to Magnus Hirschfeld 'Dear Darling Doctor Magnus'.

The simple fact of queer survival is itself inspiring and empowering:

the history of gay people shows that despite repression, secrecy and shame, we as a people have nonetheless survived, have insisted on our specialness, have developed coping strategies for survival; and therefore this history can provide real inspiration to everyone else to be just as different as they really are – to summon up the courage to insist on their specialness being respected. (Duberman, 1991)

Several queer historians opted for this discipline specifically because it falls within the liberation agenda, as did D'Emilio (1992): 'My allegiance to the academic world was, at best, tenuous; only the conviction that the movement would be strengthened by the retrieval of its hidden early history kept me at it.'

Queer history was also important to the earlier 'homophile' movement. ONE Institute opened in Los Angeles in 1956 and began offering its course

on Homosexuality in History in 1957; this was followed by The History of the Homophile Movements of Europe, in 1958–9, which included visiting lectures by men who personally knew Magnus Hirschfeld; and in 1959–60 The Homosexual in American Society or Sociology of Homosexuality was a course designed specifically to examine two new ideas: that a ‘homosexual minority’ and a ‘homosexual culture’ existed (Legg, 1994). In the same year, Jim Kepner began his very thorough seminars on Homosexuality in Modern German History: From Frederick the Great through Hitler; Don Slater began teaching The Gay Novel in 1960, the year in which the Institute issued ‘A Declaration of Homosexual Rights’. Christopher Isherwood was a director of ONE’s affiliate Institute for the Study of Human Resources from 1976 to 1984, and he researched much of *Christopher and His Kind* (1977) in ONE Institute’s Blanche M. Baker Memorial Library and Archives. A fellow director was Laud Humphreys, author of *Tearoom Trade* and *Out of the Closets, the Sociology of Homosexual Liberation* (1972). Vern L. Bullough, Professor of History at California State University, Northridge, was closely involved with the Institute from the late 1960s, notably contributing some two thousand entries from his research towards the compilation of *A Bibliography of Homosexuality*, published in 1976. From 1981 the ONE Institute Graduate School was licensed by the state education authority to offer courses leading to accredited Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in Homophile Studies. One of the first dissertations was Michael H. Lombardi’s *The Writings of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs* (1984) (his translation of Ulrichs’s complete writings was published in 1988).

ONE Inc. is resentful that its activities and publications are so lightly dismissed by social constructionist historians such as John D’Emilio (1992), who claims that when he started graduate school in 1971 “‘gay history” was a term not yet invented’. In fact ‘homophile history’ had existed as a term in the 1950s, and as a concept since the 1870s. There is a New York versus California element in gay politics, New York being the base for ‘progressive’ politically based social constructionism, and California representing the more personal, developmental, cultural, ‘lifestyle’ and New Age essentialism, much satirized by the New York set with its greater access to publishing power bases and the media. In rewriting the history of the homophile emancipation movement, the New York branch of gay liberation has attempted to reserve most of the credit for itself. In response, Dorr Legg’s (1994) book attempts to set the record straight, and certainly establishes the fact that an enormous cultural

educational programme existed some fifteen years before the supposed 'birth' of gay liberation in 1969 in New York's Stonewall riots.

In 1957 Henry (Harry) Hay began working on an article which nearly matches the title of this present book: 'The Homophile in Search of an Historical Context and Cultural Contiguity'. Though a paid-up member of the Communist Party, Hay took the essentialist approach, emphasizing the importance of anthropological evidence of cross-cultural unity in variety, for example of initiation rituals and transgender persons: 'all their *thousand modifications* are facts in a single series, and only ring the changes upon some one impulse or necessity that is implicit in the generic situation'. Harry Hay had begun promoting his concept of 'the Homosexual Minority' in 1948, and under his guidance in 1950 the Mattachine Society Mission and Purposes stated that it was 'possible and desirable that a highly ethical homosexual culture emerge, as a consequence of its work, paralleling the emerging culture of our fellow minorities – the Negro, Mexican and Jewish Peoples'. Charles Rowland, another founder of the Society, in his article 'The Homosexual Culture' (*ONE Magazine*, May 1953) 'strongly defended the proposition that homosexuals constitute a minority with a distinctive culture'. During the Mattachine Constitutional Convention on 11 April 1953, and its continuation a month later, 'the words *minority* and *culture* triggered major disputes on several occasions during the proceedings' (Legg, 1994).

But no one seemed to dispute the fundamental fallacy of the view that a minority culture has to make a contribution to its 'parent culture', that it be of value to society at large, as stated in an article on 'Homosexual Culture' by Julian Underwood in 1960: 'Homosexuals can claim to be a distinct cultural minority only as it can be proven that they make a group contribution to the dominant culture which is the specific outcome of the homosexual temperament.' Most of the discussion since the early 1960s has rested upon this fundamental misuse of the term 'minority', which partly arises from the moral force attached to the 'majority' in American democratic philosophy. The truth is that any contribution from one culture to another is wholly irrelevant to whether or not that culture is distinctive. Romany gypsies may or may not make a contribution to the societies in which they reside, but they are nevertheless a distinctive ethnic culture within society. The three 'fellow minorities' originally mentioned by Hay – Mexicans, blacks and Jews – are not offsprings of a 'parent' white American culture. They may be dominated and oppressed by white Anglo-Saxon Protestant American society, but they nevertheless have their own culture and their own history.

And queers, like Mexicans, blacks and Jews, draw strength from an awareness of their own culture and history. 'What gives any group of people distinction and dignity is its culture. This includes a remembrance of the past and a setting of itself in a world context whereby the group can see *who it is* relative to everyone else' (Grahn, 1984). The search for cultural unity in the queer past is relevant even in the age of AIDS when attention is urgently focused upon the immediate present and near future. In Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time* (1988) a man and his lover who is dying from AIDS visit Greece: 'Impossible to measure the symbolic weight of the place for a gay man. ... Ancient places "confirm" a person, uniting a man to the past and thus the future.'

Social constructionism

During the past half-generation the history of homosexuality has been dominated by social constructionist dogma. I should perhaps make it clear that I shall not be analysing social constructionist theory about the alleged 'constructs' of sex, gender, race and class, or in other fields such as literature, art and the cinema, except as they impinge directly upon the concept with which I am concerned: homosexuality in history. The social constructionists in this field include Mary McIntosh, Jeffrey Weeks, Kenneth Plummer, Robert Padgug, David M. Halperin, John D'Emilio, Michel Foucault, Sheila Jeffreys, Jonathan Ned Katz (in his later work) and, to a lesser extent, less dogmatic theorists such as David F. Greenberg and George Chauncey. The school is sometimes called 'cultural constructivism', which hides its political agenda; their 'history' invariably focuses upon the nineteenth century, the era of bourgeois capitalism capable of being subjected to Marxist/Maoist economic analysis. Jeffrey Weeks was a founding member of the *Gay Left* collective, refugees from the collapsed Gay Marxist Group, whose magazine was published twice a year during the mid to late 1970s with the aim of disseminating socialist theory *vis-à-vis* gay oppression; he later became editor of the radical *History Workshop Journal*. Members of the Lesbian History Group founded in 1984, notably Sheila Jeffreys, were involved with the London Feminist History Group, and had much the same political aims. In 1974 Jonathan Katz invited John D'Emilio to join the gay men's study group 'convened to explore the utility of Marxist theory for understanding gay oppression. We met weekly for a period of almost two years ... I came away from those readings and discussions with tools for intellectual analysis that still inform the gay history I write' (D'Emilio, 1992). When

these theorists talk about 'social constructs' they are referring specifically to ideologies constructed by bourgeois society in order to control the working classes. Towards the late 1980s much of this political agenda was hidden behind some very sophisticated theorizing, but these are the bare bones that are fairly easy to read between the lines.

The social constructionists maintain that significant shifts took place in the nineteenth century (this is when their political theory requires them to have taken place as part of the dialectics of revolution). By defining 'the homosexual' as 'the modern homosexual', the social constructionists are able to redefine the modern homosexual, who merely has 'class awareness', as the politicized homosexual, whose 'class consciousness' enables him or her to radically question such concepts as gender. The aim is to fight the class war so that 'homosexuals' (and 'men' and 'women') disappear as a class. I have much sympathy with the feminist position that heteropatriarchy is a social construct through which women are subjugated; but I have even greater sympathy with the lesbian-feminist position that lesbianism is 'natural' while 'compulsory heterosexuality' is the 'political institution', and that it is only the latter, and not the former, that requires deconstruction (Rich, 1993). The class war is an essential feature of social constructionist theory – if historical evidence can be produced which establishes the existence of the homosexual role and identity before capitalism, then the materialist theory starts to collapse. The dating of the emergence of the queer subculture, though crucial to the theory, is its weakest part.

A curious outcome of ... centuries of oppression is that when the first writings on homosexuality reached the general public at the end of the nineteenth century, some individuals revealed to psychiatrists that, although they had responded solely to members of their own sex since adolescence, until then they imagined themselves unique in the whole world. They had 'constructed' their own sexual consciousness without any social input – a feat that should be impossible according to social constructionist postulates. (W. R. Dynes, 'Social Construction Approach', *EH*)

It is very easy for historians to establish that most of the sexual categories which are supposed to have arisen under modern capitalism in fact existed much earlier. It is nevertheless important to pursue this relatively easy branch of demolition, because the nineteenth century date is one of the major props of social constructionism, without which its economic/control analysis of homosexuality becomes meaningless. Any work which

demonstrates the existence of significant 'constructs' before 1800 will tend to undermine Foucault's theories about the 'ruptures' between the 'epistemes' of the Classical Period and those of the Modern Period.

Political correctness has unfortunately relegated 'gay history' to the recent and contemporary account of the gay emancipation movement. But to place this movement in its proper historical perspective we must revert to some of the principles of 'queer history'. Jeffrey Weeks (1991) and other social constructionists have stressed 'the vital importance of distinguishing between behaviour, role, and identity in any sociological or historical approach to the subject of homosexuality'. On the contrary, I believe it is vital to recognize the integrity, unity and ambiguity of the experience that is falsified by over-intellectual analysis.

One of the reasons why many contemporary lesbian and gay theorists fail to appreciate that homosexuals existed before 1869 is the politically correct view that terms such as 'queer', 'faggot' and 'queen' are not nice, and especially since the late 1960s people have endeavoured to use the phrase 'gay and lesbian' wherever possible. There are certain men who lived before 1869 whom I would feel uneasy to call 'gay' or 'homophile', but I would not hesitate to call them queer or even silly old queens. Many of the mollies of the early eighteenth century were undoubtedly queens, whose interests and behaviour are virtually indistinguishable from queens I have known in the early 1960s (and later). I use the word 'queer' in such a way as to subsume the meanings of words such as homosexual, homophile, homoerotic and homosocial – all of which I think involve false distinctions rather than continuity (homosociality is little more than homosexuality with a fig leaf) – within the meanings of queer, faggot, dyke and gay, which more accurately reflect the working-class reality which formed gay (sub)cultures, whose authenticity middle-class lesbians and gays began denying in the 1950s and 1970s. My emphasis will be upon ethnic autonomy rather than assimilation (reflecting the separatist stance of contemporary 'queers'). 'Gay and lesbian' is perfectly acceptable for life since the 1960s, but most of my focus is upon the earlier past. 'Queer' was the word of preference for homosexuals as well as homophobes for the first half of the twentieth century, and of course is being reclaimed today in defiant rather than defensive postures. In English during the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century the words of preference were 'molly' and 'sapphist', for which good modern equivalents are 'queer' and 'dyke'. During the seventeenth century and earlier the commonest terms were 'sodomite' and 'tribade', for which, again, precise modern equivalents are 'queer' and 'dyke'. In ancient and indigenous and

premodern cultures the nearest modern equivalents are 'queer' and 'tomboy'. And the nearest modern equivalent for the nineteenth-century term 'homosexual' is: queer.

I add my voice to the widespread dissatisfaction with social constructionist thought, whose initial premises have been constantly reinforced by restatement and incestuous quotation among constructionist colleagues rather than supported by scholarly research. The approach quickly became authoritarian and totalitarian, insisting that only one method be used and that certain questions could not be asked:

There remains today a fundamental divide between historians who believe that one should first decide what questions require answers, then wring answers out of whatever material is available, however unsatisfactory, and historians who prefer to be guided by the available material and to ask only those questions to which the material provides well-substantiated answers. (Marwick, 1989)

Social constructionists have even redefined the word 'experience' as a product of discourse, so 'evidence' itself is a social construct (Scott, 1993). The notion that there can be a social constructionist history is a contradiction in terms.

It was quickly recognized that social constructionism seemed to be founded upon historical ignorance, and it is no longer possible to dismiss this ignorance as a product of youthful overenthusiasm for a new idea. The recent argument that the debate between essentialists and social constructionists is 'arid and false' is an effort by social constructionists to consolidate their position in the face of the increasing recognition that by the end of the 1980s more and more historical evidence was coming to light and undermining their theories, which after twenty years of increasing abstruseness were still no more than unsupported working hypotheses. Marwick's (1989) judgement on Foucault's major works is that they are

philosophical, intuitive, and imaginative, and lacking in effective historical underpinning ... there has been the production of ever more complex, more abstract, and more uncompromising theory in which anything so mundane as what actually happens in real human societies seems to become less and less relevant. ... With someone like Foucault it is probably truer to say that he sought refuge in imaginative leaps of greater and greater incredibility, rather than in any coherent theory.

Camille Paglia (1994) more forcefully judges Foucault to have been

a glib game-player who took very little research a very long way. ... Leftists have damaged their own cause ... by their indifference to fact, their carelessness and sloth, their unforgivable lack of professionalism as scholars. ... My first proposal for the gay world: Get rid of dead abstract 'theory' and rabid social constructionism, the limp legacy of academic know-nothings.

The absence of historical underpinning to social constructionist theory can be readily demonstrated. 'The most vulnerable claim [of the constructionists] is that the notion of the homosexual as a distinct "species" originated only about a hundred years ago, an invention of the medical profession or the product of capitalist urbanization' (Greenberg, 1988); the materials gathered by Greenberg's exhaustive review of research

make abundantly clear that the world was neither conceptually nor behaviorally polymorphously perverse prior to the Industrial Revolution. ... Foucault, who held a chair in the history of ideas, assumed too readily that intellectuals are the sole repository of conceptual invention and simply imposed a new hegemonic discourse on passive recipients.

On the whole, a strictly social constructionist strategy has ended up throwing the baby out with the bath water. As Anthony Julius notes in his review of *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity* (1995) (essays collected by Linda Mochlin and Tamar Garb), if we take the view that what we hold to be our most private self is itself a construct, then

two unappealing consequences follow. First, if all Jews are 'constructed', then the difference between 'fictional' and 'real' Jews, or between fictional Jews that are merely 'stereotypical' and those that are fully realised, is not very important. Second, giving an account of individual suffering, of the violations of self, ceases to be interesting. ... If, as one contributor says, "Real Jews" and "fictitious Jews" occupy the same representational theatre', then you disable yourself from protesting: 'I have been misrepresented!' ... One cannot write about persecution in a language in which that experience is invisible.

Spencer (1995) rightly rejects Foucault's position that 'The sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex was hardly noticed in the past.' Rather than the end of the nineteenth century, Spencer, with a much better

survey of the available historical evidence, places a noticeable shift at the beginning of the medieval period:

the concept of bisexuality was discarded from the consciousness of society, [and] a polarity began to establish itself between the Other (what is repressed) and the Self (which is publicly acknowledged); between that which will later be called homosexual, which must be hidden, and the status quo, the heterosexual, which needs to be publicly enhanced. Human sexual nature, in the way it was considered socially, was divided into two parts, homosexual and heterosexual, as if they were mutually exclusive.

This itself is not a very satisfactory 'grand theory', for there are many examples prior to the thirteenth century that show an awareness of a predominantly homosexual orientation, and, equally, many contemporary queers who do not regard themselves as being exclusively homosexual.

My aim in the present book will be to examine the nature of queer history, with a focus upon historiographical issues that have not been adequately addressed by historians in the 1980s and 1990s, who have largely failed to recognize the difference between attitudes towards homosexuals and the experiences of queers, and who have built up theories that have no empirical foundations in history. The myth that the homosexual was born circa 1869 is easily demolished, but beyond that I aim to show that the social constructionist emperor has no clothes. I will argue that a typology of queer personalities and relationships and the characteristic features of a queer culture arise from a core of queer desire and are not wholly configured by the regulation of that desire. Queer history properly considered is the attempt to recover the authentic voice of queer experience rather than simply to document suppression or oppression.

Essentialism

My position is sited within the essentialist camp, and I hope to expose some of the fallacies of social constructionist theory, which I see as the main impediment to the understanding of queer history. The history of ideas (and ideologies) is enormously interesting and valuable, but it is tragic that homosexuals have been subsumed *totally* under the idea of the homosexual. The result is little better than intellectual ethnic cleansing. In the social constructionist view, knowledge is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through ideological discourse. In my essentialist view, knowledge is discovered, repressed, suppressed and recovered through

history and experience. Social constructionism emphasizes revolutionary development (the dialectic); I see evolutionary development, cultural growth and permutation, and sometimes mere change in fashion. Rather than the word 'construct', which implies building from scratch according to an arbitrarily chosen blueprint, I prefer 'consolidate' or 'forge', implying that the basic material already exists but can be subjected to shaping and polishing.

'Cultural constructs' are sometimes set up in opposition to 'universal truths' in an effort to force essentialists into an impossibly idealistic corner, but 'culture' is a concept that can be claimed by essentialists as well as by social constructionists. The essentialist position is that queer culture is organic rather than artificial. Social constructionists see culture as a construct whose arbitrary foundation is determined by the builder; I see culture as the cultivation of a root, and I shall be developing the ethnic view that queer culture grows naturally from personal queer identity and experience and is self-cultivated by queers rather than by the ideology and labels of straight society. I have no objection if critics wish to call me an 'essentialist' pure and simple, because I believe that homosexuals are born and not made. However, I also believe that queers fashion their own culture (using their own resources rather than being imposed upon by society), and that will be a significant focus of my own version of essentialism, which might be called 'queer cultural essentialism'. I take the view that there is a core of queer desire that is transcultural, transnational and transhistorical, a queer essence that is innate, congenital, constitutional, stable or fixed in its basic pattern. However, I distinguish between queer persons, queer sexual acts and behaviour, and queer social interactions, and try not to confuse the constancy of the desire with the variability of its expression. Personal queer identity arises from within, and is then consolidated along lines suggested by the collective identity of the queer (sub)culture.

In the theoretical literature it is generally assumed that essentialism is the same as uniformism/conformism (often made explicit in lesbian-feminist theory). But the view that homosexuality is a monolith is not at all an essential feature of essentialism. The essentialist does not say there is only *one* gay root; in fact a *diversity of roots* has been a key feature of essentialism since the early 1970s (witness the title of the two-volume collection of essays from *Gay Sunshine: Gay Roots*). It is really social constructionist theorists who have forced essentialism into this straitjacket, just as they have forced gay experience into the political straitjacket.

I have no problem in reconciling the view that queer desire is innate but that it also expresses itself in sexual or social actions and (sub)cultures that may reflect to a greater or lesser degree the time and place in which they occur. Self-presentation can be carefully constructed while being founded upon an innate self-conception. There should be no difficulty in recognizing, for example, that modern British gay consciousness was well in place before American styles of presenting gayness were deliberately imported into Britain: 'Michael Glover, who started the London Apprentice [pub], had seen leather bars and cruise bars in the States and it was his intention to bring that style of bar to London' (Healy, 1996). The specific sexual custom of fisting appeared first in America and was exported to Europe and Japan, probably in the year 1971, but it is not likely that an entirely new *mentalité* arose in that year, or even that decade.

Beneath a (fairly limited) variety of customs that differ from culture to culture lies the phenomenon of queer desire. That desire need not necessarily be expressed through sexual acts: queer culture and queer 'sexuality' go beyond genital sexuality. Henry James, as he walked along the river in Oxford in 1869, seeing the punts full of 'the mighty lads of England, clad in white flannel and blue, immense, fair-haired, magnificent in their youths', felt that his heart 'would crack with the fullness of satisfied desire' (cited by Kaplan, 1992). This kind of diffuse homoerotic passion for golden lads or lasses is a central feature of gay and lesbian culture, whether or not it reflects the sexual longing and nostalgia that can arise from 'sublimation', and even though its avenues of expression are often restricted and controlled by society in ways specific to each society. Homosexuality is a broad stream which continues to run despite being dammed up and channelled off by social control. The evidence of history points to repression rather than construction as the shaping force of queer identity and culture. The opportunities for expressing queer desire have been increasingly restricted in modern times, but the desire remains the same. The inner drive has simply been repressed or liberated to varying degrees from one era and culture to another. Trevisan's (1986) history of homosexuality in Brazil more or less confirms the perception of the early travellers to southern countries that there exists a 'Carnival instinct', an 'indisputable taste for lechery', a homoeroticism that gives the *bunda*, the backside, a privileged place:

Any attempt at the historical systemisation of homosexuality as experienced by Brazilians will be less the history of permissiveness arising from the mechanisms of social control (from the Inquisition

and police censorship to psychiatry and academic science) and more the insurrection of vestiges of an uncontrolled desire which flourishes underground, in the backyards of the provinces and the public conveniences of large cities.

The queer historian can adopt an essentialist position without having to clearly specify which popular scientific theory is regarded as most correct. Although the essentialist position assumes a physiological grounding, it is not incumbent upon a historian to offer biological theories concerning brain structure, chromosomes, hormones and genes. The business of the historian, as opposed to, say, the geneticist, is to examine historical evidence for or against the issue of constitutionality itself. The historian of homosexuals in Renaissance Venice need acquire no more expertise in the field of genetics than a historian of immigration patterns of the gypsies (travellers) in the Balkans.

Earlier biological studies which tried to show a link between sexual orientation and the physical development of the genitalia proved inconclusive and have been abandoned. Current studies purporting to show a link between sexual orientation and hormonal influence upon the brain and genetic make-up may similarly prove inconclusive. The studies of Simon LeVay (for example *The Sexual Brain*, 1993), and others whose work has led to tabloid headlines about 'the gay gene', have provoked serious criticism of methodological failings in defining the deviant group, of the inadequate control of many variables and the inability to quantify very tiny differences in measurements of brain tissue (Vines, 1992). The brain continues to develop for several years after birth, but the degree to which this allows for 'social' influences is debatable. The psychoanalytical theory that homosexuality is 'acquired' by experience during, say, the first three years of childhood may never be proved or disproved by historical research; recollections by modern persons about their first three years are untrustworthy, and testimony about the very early childhood of homosexuals in ancient and premodern periods is scarce. But in any case the idea that queerness is 'nature nurtured' is still an essentialist position rather than a compromise between the born versus bred argument; the social constructionist position completely turns its back upon nature. Rather like exclusive heterosexuality, social constructionism lies solely at point 0 on the Kinsey scale: points 1 to 6 are all essentialist to a greater or lesser extent.

Historical research tends to support the essentialist position that queer desire is congenital and then constituted into a meaningful queer identity

during childhood. The message of abundant personal testimony on the subject, in a wide range of sources, from fifteenth-century Italy to late twentieth-century Thailand, from biographies and autobiographies to novels, is that *queerness dawns* around the age of 7, or, if it comes later, that it is something that has lain dormant in the personality, but was always there. Chosen as the spokesperson for the 1988 World Expo in Australia because she was the only one living who had attended the 1888 Expo, E. M. 'Monte' Punshon, who died in 1989 at the age of 106, revealed to the media that 'she had known she was a lesbian for nearly a century – since the age of six' (Richards, 1990).

Gender nonconformity

Queerness at an early age is usually recollected as a positive rather than a negative feeling, a suggestion that it is *not* something constructed by stigma, because the awareness precedes the age at which internalized stigmatization could be activated. However, 'gender constructs' could possibly occur at a very early age, and gender roles are often used to support social constructionist arguments. The view that children are wholly conditioned by their parents ignores the fact that 'children are born with differing temperaments which to some degree determine how they will be treated by parents and others' (Legg, 1994). The 1981 Kinsey Institute studies of possible correlates between homosexuality and other factors such as class, siblings, etc., 'came up with almost nothing. They very nearly found that the only powerful predictor of adult homosexuality is childhood gender nonconformity, a finding that has been replicated often, both retrospectively and prospectively' (J. D. Weinrich, 'Sociobiology', *EH*). However, to posit gender nonconformity as somehow 'causing' homosexuality begs the question 'what causes the gender nonconformity? Researchers have suggested that at some level, the child and family know from an early point that the child is sexually "different"' (R. C. Savin-Williams, 'Youth', *EH*).

John Tanner (1780–1847), who lived with the North American Indians for the last thirty years of his life, and who was constantly approached by a 50-year-old man who had already lived with many husbands and now wanted to live with him, said that among the Objibbeway the *berdache* 'are commonly called A-go-kwa, a word which is expressive of their *condition*' (cited by Legg, 1994). A common theme is that the two-spirit individual is destined to be the way he or she is. Usually this calling is

discovered in early childhood; at one extreme, the infant who picks up a female article of clothing or occupation rather than the male objects which have been placed in a circle near it will be 'dedicated' to the two-spirit life, and this has been used to argue for social conditioning. But the ritual could well be a case of retrospective rationalization, as parents explain and justify their children's personality, in the same way that the dreams 'authorizing' these transformations are often 'recalled' after the event. An observer of *berdache* among the Crow of the Plains in 1903 explained, 'I was told that when very young, those persons manifested a decided preference for things pertaining to female duties'; while another observer of the Miami said, 'There were men who are bred for this purpose from their childhood' from the first moment they are seen picking up a spindle etc., but most of the evidence suggests that they were 'self-recruited' (Whitehead, 1993).

There were also female *berdache*, for example the *hwame* among the Mohave, though their role seems to have been less clearly institutionalized. Female transvestites, for example in the Cocopa, where young girls manifest 'male proclivities indicated by a desire to play with boys, make bows and arrows, hunt birds and rabbits', and among the Yuman the *kwe'rhamé* are rare, but they too 'realize their character through a dream at puberty', characteristically dreaming of men's weapons: 'As a small child the *kwe'rhamé* plays with boys' toys' (cited by Whitehead, 1993). In other words, like a good many modern lesbians, they were born tomboys.

Most *berdache* are described by themselves and their societies as comprising a 'third sex/gender', yet modern anthropologists concentrate on culture and custom and generally do not spend much time commenting upon their physiological – that is, essentialist – characteristics: 'Spontaneous use of female speech patterns, a piping voice, or feminine ways of laughing and walking are sometimes mentioned as identifying the budding *berdache*' (Whitehead, 1993). There is abundant evidence that the *berdache* – exactly like most lesbians and gay men – have an innate nature that resists being heterosexually constructed. The Mohave, like many other tribes, explained it thus in 1937:

When there is a desire in a child's heart to become a transvestite, that child will act different. It will let people become aware of that desire. They may insist on giving the child the toys and garments of its true sex, but the child will throw them away and do this every time there is a big [social] gathering. (Cited by Whitehead, 1993)

The *berdache* were noted for being exclusively homosexual from the moment they took on the characteristic identity/role until their death (Greenberg, 1988) (though they paired off with non-*berdache* men). The common view that they wore the clothes of the other sex is an oversimplified stereotype; it is more accurate to say that they wore *some* clothes of the other sex, which reflects their third-sex (or 'two-spirit') status; indeed more recent anthropologists describe such behaviour as 'mixed-gender' rather than 'cross-gender' or 'cross-dressing' (a term coined by Edward Carpenter in 1911), to get away from the simplistic idea of 'reversal' or 'inversion'. Greenberg points out that the dichotomous view of gender used by anthropologists is inadequate, but he then uses the prejudicial phrase 'partial or incomplete transformation' to accord with his view that the 'core' of the phenomenon is based upon gender rather than orientation. Whitehead (1993) similarly argues that 'for Native Americans, occupational pursuits and dress/demeanor were the important determinants of an individual's social classification, and sexual object choice was its trailing rather than its leading edge'.

This kind of foreground versus background debate, however, obscures the central point, that the *berdache* has a unified sexual/cultural identity in which sexuality is as fundamental as gender. Homosexuality is so closely tied up with the *berdache* identity that to assert that gender is 'the important determinant' is prescriptive rather than descriptive. Homosexuality is the constant in the *berdache*; their gender behaviour is variable (for example, ranging from mostly male to mostly female clothing or occupations). Gender dress/demeanour is most sharply marked when a *berdache* marries a man: what is never adequately considered is the possibility that the other-gender option was adopted *after* the homosexual relationship was chosen, to allow for the efficient division of labour in 'husband-wife' couples. The active/passive roles of the *berdache* and his husband are not necessarily fixed in private, only in public: a Hupa *berdache* says of his partner, 'As far as it was publicly known, he [the husband] was the man. But in bed there was an exchange of roles. They have to keep an image as masculine, so they always ask me not to tell anybody' (cited by Williams, 1986).

Part of the social constructionist analysis of the 'gender role' of the *berdache* depends upon the allegation that the husband (and the wife, in the case of the female *berdache*) is simply a man (or woman) rather than publicly categorized into a role. However, this is not strictly true: husbands of *berdaches* and wives of *hwame* were frequently the butt of social ridicule, a 'kidding' or 'teasing' severe enough to break up such marriages: in other

words, a homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy clearly functioned here (Williams, 1986). McIntosh (1968) paradoxically acknowledges this yet ignores it in her discussion of the homosexual role. The view that husbands of *berdaches* do not form a peculiar category is contradicted by George Catlin's famous paintings and descriptions in the 1830s of the 'Dance of the Berdache'. These in fact feature what he called the 'society ... of odd fellows', which consists of those who have had sex with the *berdache* dancing around him and making a public proclamation of that fact; only the partners of the *berdache* are allowed to join the dance and to partake of the feast afterwards (Legg, 1994). No native American term is given for these 'odd fellows', but the distinctive category was nevertheless institutionalized by this ritual.

The shamans of Siberia and Central Asia have many features in common with the *berdache*, though the phenomenon is more closely associated with ritual ecstasy or trance states. Transvestism is important to the role, and there is an institutionalized role for female shamans. The male shamans regard themselves as the 'wife' of a supernatural 'husband', and they marry men less frequently than do the *berdache*. It is important to recognize the distinctive religious function of the shamans, but it is also a fact that homosexuals have a professional monopoly on this role. It is by no means a modern gay anachronism to suggest, as did Edward Carpenter, that shamanism springs from homosexual orientation, or that 'In the whole process the homosexual-transvestite orientation is primary, the shamanic calling secondary' (W. Johansson, 'Shamanism', *EH*).

The *hijras* of modern India – mostly transvestite or transsexual male prostitutes who perform music and dance at important social festivals – have been reduced to specifically gender phenomena by modern theorists despite the overriding importance of homosexuality in their lives. The *hijras* are of course 'constructed', in the sense that they castrate themselves, but they maintain that their *hijra* identity predates that castration and is specifically a homosexual identity. Today, *hijras* are conscious that they are part of the historical tradition of court eunuchs, when they wore male rather than female clothing (Dalrymple, 1993). Shakuntala, a *hijra* interviewed in 1981, emphasized:

In many places men who are perfect men have joined this community only for the sake of earning a living. This is not good. Only men who have not spoiled any lady or got any children should come into the hijra company. You should not have had any affairs with ladies, not have loved ladies, or done any sexual thing with