



Simon Avery and Katherine M. Graham, eds., *Sex, Time and Place: Queer Histories of London, c.1850 to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), ISBN: 9781474234924, 320 pages, £85

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This illuminating and wide-ranging collection asks what constitutes 'Queer London' and, more broadly, how we ought to approach queer space and history. These questions are addressed as much through the arrangement of the anthology as they are by the content of its individual chapters. Having eschewed the conventional organising principles of chronology or theme, the editors declare that the collection should be read first and foremost with an eye to connections, synergies and discontinuities across its variously situated subjects. Their approach is evidently informed by recent queer historiography and theorisations about queer temporality. The organisation and framing of *Sex, Time and Place* evinces the same suspicion about linear narratives of progress that motivates much of this scholarship; it is also similarly preoccupied not only with the ways the queer past continues to press upon and shape the present, but also with how the project of queer history is propelled by an urgent desire to forge connections between incommensurable lives – to 'touch across time', as Carolyn Dinshaw has it. Equally, the editors are keen to present a complex, diverse portrait of queer London, one which emphasises various kinds of interactions and intersections – involving class, gender and racial difference in particular – that too often have been side-lined in recent queer historiography.

Somewhat peculiarly, *Sex, Time and Place* is furnished with three separate introductions. There are of course sensible professional reasons for the editors' decision to each author an introductory chapter, but the arrangement complements the aims of the anthology rather well. Avery contributes the first, which explores the conceptual

parameters of queer space, and Graham the second, which is more concerned with queer temporality. (A short, co-written third chapter introduces the rest of the book's material.) Avery's chapter helpfully outlines the multiple, often contradictory ways queer space has been conceived. Drawing on some of the earliest theorisations of the 'queering' of space, he indicates how queer sites, as places of rupture and flux, may provide bases from which heteronormative social structures may be challenged. Such optimism must be tempered, however, by the fact that, all too frequently, the act of recovering queer spatial dynamics from the past relies heavily on archival evidence that corresponds to the regulation and disciplining of unruly bodies. Moreover, being unstable, these vital resources are often fragile and temporary. Avery's account gains urgency through its focus on the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, which for much of the eighteenth century served as capital's principal site for night-time leisure. In their heyday the Gardens were celebrated for their fantastical entertainments but gained notoriety for all manner of nocturnal transgressions. Their strangeness, their carnivalesque upending of hierarchy and collapsing of categories, and their dedication to pleasure has encouraged some historians to assert the Gardens' queerness. Avery draws a parallel between the fate of the Gardens, whose popularity sharply declined in the early nineteenth century in the wake of redevelopment and moral censure, and the current situation of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, the celebrated queer performance venue whose survival is threatened by gentrification. And, noting Vauxhall's status as a transport hub, Avery suggests that the constant movement and encounter that has long defined the area captures very well 'both the possibilities of, and threats to, London's queer spaces'.

Aptly enough, Graham's chapter opens with a personal account of the loss of such a venue – a gay pub in Hounslow in which she once worked and socialised, subsequently demolished to make way for a bus station. The anecdote is intended to highlight how lost queer sites continue to shape lives, or reciprocally, as Graham reflects, 'how this past structures how I act in any queer space in the present'. More generally, it gestures towards a more expansive understanding of queer history that takes account of the connections between desiring bodies situated in time, and indeed – again following Dinshaw – the desire for connection, or even for 'community' across time. Graham offers a reading of a chapter of Jonathan Kemp's 2010 novel *London Triptych* as a way of illustrating some of the motivations for and consequences of delineating such 'constellations of bodies'. Graham argues that the novel – which narrates queer goings on in the capital over three periods spanning more than a century – 'insists that we read across times'; moreover, it is the space of a 1950s queer pub that facilitates these connections, which in turn enhance understandings of the present. While acknowledging that its focus is limited to white male experience, Graham suggests that Kemp's novel nevertheless provides a model for the collection's own wider, less exclusive account of queer London, with its network of partial connections between fragments of experience across time and space.

My own experience of reading the rest of the book is a measure of the success of the editors' approach: I was repeatedly struck, and sometimes moved, by all kinds of parallels, gaps and echoes, or by the way sites and encounters that had been teased into view in one chapter lingered as present absences in the next. For example, in her richly detailed account of the disgraced artist Simeon Solomon's self-exile from middle-

class respectability, Carolyn Conroy argues that, in the late nineteenth century, impoverished, disorderly districts such as St Giles – where Solomon revelled in ‘happy [...] degradation’ – came increasingly to be recognised as places hospitable to queer desire. Marking a turnaround of sorts, Emma Spruce’s chapter on contemporary ‘bigot geographies’ critically engages with a tendency amongst white gentrifiers to characterise Brixton as the opposite of gay-friendly, due to its large black population. Spruce’s intervention – part of a larger, vital project to contest homonormative narratives of progress – challenges these racist representations by foregrounding evidence of earlier queer settlement in the district and by recalling side-lined stories of black queer subculture. But of course, in a more indirect fashion – by elucidating all kinds of marginalised queer histories – the collection as a whole performs much the same function.

Later on in the collection, Anne Witchard’s gripping account of lesbian nightlife in early twentieth-century Soho is followed by Marco Venturi’s much more familiar portrait (at least to me) of the district after it became established as the capital’s principal gay ‘village’ in the 1980s. The juxtaposition encouraged me to map across locations from one ‘scene’ to the other, a process which made the earlier incarnation of Soho more tangible; Witchard makes clear that it was, after all, a place defined by all kinds of crossing over. Equally, I began to apprehend more clearly the contingency of recent incarnations of queer Soho. Across other chapters, specific lineages emerge, for instance, regarding the pursuit of new scientific knowledge about human sexuality and, latterly, concerning homosexual law reform. The contributions of various organisations, however, are never understood in purely discursive terms; rather, these histories are always defined by their location and their embeddedness within wider social networks. Lesley A. Hall’s chapter examines the role of the British Society of the Study of Sex Psychology, which met during the interwar years, in changing attitudes towards homosexuality, and pays particular attention to how London’s slowly shifting geographies of respectability helped determine its character and situation. Witchard, meanwhile, devotes attention to the much more bohemian and eclectic 1917 Club, frequented by Virginia Woolf and other ‘Bloomsberries’ (including members of the BSSSP), which was located in the red light district that was Gerard Street. Silvia Antosa meanwhile focuses on a precursor to these organisations, the Cannibal Club, a raffish inner circle of the Anthropological Society, which was founded in 1863. Antosa ably demonstrates how the group’s homosocial bonding and evident interest in homoeroticism was enabled by the much wider spatial and discursive networks of empire.

Some contributors attempt to tell longer histories single-handedly. Dominic Janes offers a fairly lengthy account of the history of gender transgression among queer men, but it proves useful in the important task of resituating Francis Bacon’s paintings – which have typically been interpreted through the universalising framework of existential despair – within the specific context of homosexual urban subcultures. Kayte Stokoe’s application of the concept of ‘trans* practices’ to two very different kinds of performance – those of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century celebrity male impersonators, such as the actress Vesta Tilley, and of those taking the stage in London’s contemporary Drag King scene – is nuanced. Her suggestion that Tilley’s success has contributed to a lack of understanding of the complexities of Drag King

performance today, however, strikes a wrong note. Perhaps because the anthology is organised so as to encourage the reader to make connections between the chapters and across history, those which are boldly stated by individual contributors seem to overreach. Meanwhile, Matt Cook's account of the development of geographies of care in the capital in the wake of the AIDS crisis is probably the only chapter to reflect on a sudden transformation of queer London. Movingly, Cook concludes by suggesting ways this 'new city', which saw gay men begin to traverse and occupy urban space in different ways, was also haunted by a series of absences. Moreover, Cook insists that, while the trauma of AIDS was an intensely isolating experience, but also, to a certain extent, a unifying one, its impact continues to be felt, in uneven ways, in the everyday lives of the men who survived it.

Given the editors' stated ambition that *Sex, Time and Place* should articulate a less exclusive vision of queer London, it is disappointing that the material on literature is largely limited to the work of two of the most highly regarded living queer writers, both of whom are white. Paulina Palmer provides sensible readings of the fiction of Sarah Waters, though relies heavily on familiar frameworks, such as the carnivalesque, to make her case. As recent winner of Literary London Society's Presidents' Prize Charlotte Stroud has shown, there is scope for innovation in the increasingly busy area of Waters scholarship. Bart Eeckhout makes a more compelling contribution with his account of Alan Hollinghurst's novels, across which he traces a shift in the way queer space is conceived and presented. If Hollinghurst's debut, *The Swimming-pool Library*, is defined by an almost anthropological eye that appraises the numerous queer habitats across the capital, Eeckhout argues that the author's most recent work is more concerned with the epistemological questions that motivate queer historians. Eeckhout's analysis of *The Stranger's Child*, set largely on the fringes of London, also provides a welcome foray into suburbia; noticeably, the collection's only other consideration of the periphery is Graham's memories of the Hounslow pub. A black writer does in fact provide the focus of one of the collection's chapters, Gemma Romain and Caroline Bressey's study of the Jamaican poet Claude McKay, who stayed in London for two years after the First World War. While the authors assert that McKay's homosocial/homoerotic poems 'were radical in several ways', frustratingly, they fail to offer virtually any textual evidence in support; many of their claims are wholly reliant on secondary sources. More productively, Romain and Bressey note that McKay's experience of the 'freedoms' of bohemia and queer space was inflected by his blackness (he suffered racist abuse in the 1917 Club, for instance). They proceed to claim that an understanding of the geographies of black men with whom McKay socialised, but which are obscured in archive, requires a continual reading 'against the grain'; however, a clearer demonstration of how to effect such a reading would have been helpful.

Apart from Romain and Bressey's remarks, concern about the problematics of the queer archive remains implicit throughout the collection. A significant exception is Sam McBean's excellent chapter, which concludes the book. McBean focuses on the work of the photographer Christa Holka, who has documented the contemporary London lesbian scene. McBean meditates on Holka's 'I WAS THERE' series, whose images have also featured on a variety of websites, including Facebook, and in which McBean identifies a set of contradictory desires and anxieties about the nature of queer historicity. If 'I WAS THERE' insists on a queer presence in contemporary London, it also – as the past tense

suggests – asserts a deeper, historical reach. Indeed, it denotes a compulsive archiving that attempts to give historical weight to the present. On the other hand, the emphatic capitalisation gestures towards insecurities about the archivability of contemporary queer London. McBean observes that the dissemination of the photographs across the web actually threatens to sever their connection from the queer spaces they represent; in doing so they resurrect concerns about the invisibility of queer experience in the archive. Far from being bleakly pessimistic, these observations serve as a fitting conclusion to a book that understands the relationship between queer space and history as profoundly, but also productively, ambivalent, and which seeks to trace the longer genealogy of queer historical feeling in the city.

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