To Be and to Have: The Rise of Queer Historicism

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Book Review

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The Rise of Queer Historicism

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Deep Gossip
Henry Abelove
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. xviii + 104 pp.

Making Girls into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity
Kathryn R. Kent
Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. xi + 355 pp.

Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century
Graham Robb
London: Picador, 2003. viii + 341 pp.

When "homosexual" emerged as a taxonomic, clinical category in the late nineteenth century, sexual identities, for good and for ill, could be officially named, envisioned, and policed. While critics of earlier periods continue to grapple with the social history of homoerotic desire, the language of historicism (with its emphasis on legal and medical discourse) is often at odds with queer theory in tracking and articulating the existence of nonnormative sexuality. Strictly speaking, as Bruce R. Smith writes with respect to "premodern sexualities": "In texts written before the 1880s, perhaps before the 1920s, perhaps even before the 1980s, sexuality, in our psychopolitical understanding of it, is something that is not there." Nevertheless, the lure of exploring what *is* there persists because, as Smith elaborates, sexuality "seems to be one of the most natural, most universal, of human traits" and

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thus "provides an exemplary case of how identity is in fact a function of cultural history."[1] Acknowledging their indebtedness to Foucault's model of the cultural construction of sexuality, the three books under review attempt to reconcile the projects of historical excavation with the queering of history.

In this spirit, both Graham Robb and Kathryn R. Kent (in the first half of her book) reorient readers to the penumbral formation of homosexuality in the nineteenth century, while Henry Abelove makes unexpected historical connections between the past and the present. Abelove's slim and elegant collection of essays records "deep gossip," a phrase he takes from Allen Ginsberg's homage to Frank O'Hara's acute ability to overhear the rumblings of gay culture. As a social historian immersed in literary study, Abelove writes essays that challenge the division between gay and lesbian history and queer studies, a division that subtly yet surely informs the projects of both Kent and Robb. Abelove bridges Robb's historiography, which narrativizes nineteenth-century "gossip," and Kent's more theorized analysis of sexual identity formation.

In "The Queering of Lesbian/Gay Identity," Abelove is troubled and amused by his queer students' rejection of what they regard as the tired "trope of marginalization" in gay and lesbian social history, along with their preference for "presence" and multiple "identifications" over claims to "identity" or "authenticity." For them, "the self is a myth, a delusion, a sham, a part of the ideology of humanism" that "has long since been fundamentally and irrevocably discredited" (48). "Queer" appeals to them because it lacks "the supposititious definiteness of 'lesbian,' 'bisexual,' or 'gay'" (33). Yet these queer students are ultimately not without interest in "gay and lesbian history," for "historicizing to destabilizing is arguably just a step" (54). Abelove in this way describes what I am calling queer historicism, a critical trend of locating "identifications" (rather than identity), modes of being and having, in historical contexts. This critical approach is particularly evident in Kent's "destabilizing" book, reared as it is on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "'queer tutelage'" (*Making Girls into Women*, 204).

While few would contest that identity is socially constructed, queer theory has to some extent further opened the possibility of rereading periods prior to modern sexual taxonomies as a means of undoing the straitjacketing of the homo/heterosexual binary. Without resolving the critical debate between nature and nurture, essentialism and constructionism (what Smith calls "the Scylla and Charybdis that has obstructed academic discourse about homosexuality"),[2] historians of gay and lesbian culture continue at the least to employ a strategic essentialism to assert legal visibility. By contrast, queer studies, as Abelove's anecdote suggests, has shifted from a minoritizing approach to one that claims a more uni-

versal as well as diverse effulgence of nonnormative identifications. In effect, queer studies has veered from a monolithic model of historicism (and its concomitant modes of nomination) to one that depends on a paradox: the transhistorical existence of erotic pluralism—in other words, a history continuously riddled by multiple desires as well as nominations for sexual behaviors and experience. Queer historicism, as I see it, arises out of a desire to analyze and situate historical texts as cultural material, fusing the work of excavation with the recognition that sexualities are socially constructed and can take multiple forms. What unites these three books, then, is their "queer historical" (if you will) frustration with relying on limiting historical identity categories of "homosexual" or gay and lesbian. While not explicitly engaged in queering identity, Robb objects to an axiomatic adherence to Foucault's insistence on homosexuality as the product of only a narrowly delineated historical episteme, whereas Kent and Abelove more explicitly invoke the plasticity of *queer* to adumbrate an expanded field of sexual acts and identifications.

Robb's book (the least theoretical of the three) pivots on its displacement of the popularized model of "the homosexual" as "a creature invented by Victorian doctors," whereas the "earlier 'sodomite' had simply indulged in certain acts" (42). Before the consolidation of "homosexual" as an identity description, there were "marjories," "poufs," "sapphists," "tribades." For Robb, such appellations are not simply reducible to "acts" (114). In fact, the coining of *homosexuality* in 1868 did not suddenly inaugurate an entity so much as rename one: "There always were people who were primarily or exclusively attracted to people of their own sex. They had no difficulty in identifying themselves as homosexual (or whatever word was used), often from a very early age" (12). In this way, *Strangers* is almost an essentialist take on cultural history, although it also claims that sexuality, like fashion, fluctuates with each historical period. While Robb draws on material from ancient times to the present, noting that each epoch believed that sodomy was dangerously "on the rise" (2–3), he omits to mention that sodomy, at least in the earlier centuries, might include a range of "heterodoxies of all sorts: sorcery, religious heresy, treason," where "homosexual acts belonged to the anathema of this larger whole."[3] His focus, appropriately, remains on the nineteenth century, the period with the closest ties to a modern psychological sense of identity.

Robb makes three chief claims: first, the expression of homosexual desire permeated the nineteenth century before the full articulation of sexual identity; second, the nineteenth-century "homosexual" would not have found his or her culture nearly as hellish or oppressive as our understanding would have it; and third, the legal and medical naming of homosexuality did not result in top-down

monolithic regulation of identities. Most significantly, "the elaborate taxonomy" of the latter part of the nineteenth century was "actually invented and publicized by homosexuals," who should not be reduced to "a helpless, silent minority, blinking in the torchlight of investigative doctors" (67–68). Robb makes the important observation that "there is just as much evidence for the 'construction' of medical discourse by homosexuals as there is for the medical construction of homosexuality" (66). Thus homosexuals were actively engaged in the process of constructing their own identities.

More decisively New Historicist, *Making Girls into Women* attends to what Kent calls "protolesbian" identifications, which uneasily paved the way for "modern lesbian subjectivity" (2). By combining Foucault's insights with those of psychoanalysis, she strives to "make sexual desires and identifications visible" by revealing the "possible erotic effects of disciplinary intimacy" (11) as a crucial supplement to the critical scholarship that has largely focused on same-sex male desire in the nineteenth century. Following the leads of Sedgwick and Judith Butler, Kent explores, in chapters with such provocative titles as "'Trying All Kinds,'" the same-sex "identificatory erotics" of women in the penumbral post–Civil War society, primarily as evidenced in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. This erotics set the stage for the formation and queering of the Girl Scouts, the rise of lesbian modernist writers Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein, and finally the eroticized pedagogical relationship between Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop.

Kent does not search texts for a lesbian unconscious or, like Robb, argue for a continuity of lesbian identification across epochs; rather, she engages in a close-reading practice whereby the "surface *as* surface" reflects the period's less visible erotics (11). She maintains that "efforts to overturn the centrality of the heterosexual family" through alternate forms of desire coexisted with the imperatives of normative identity (15). While Kent's plotting of the "rise of lesbian identity" relies specifically on "white middle-class 'women's culture'" (1) from the nineteenth century to modernism in America, Robb attempts not only to provide a social history that covers "one and a half continents and one and a half centuries" (14) but also to treat both gays and lesbians in their "proto" existence (to use Kent's phrasing). Robb's purported aim is not entirely successful: male sexuality dominates (probably because of the greater cultural obfuscation of lesbianism), making Kent's book all the more refreshing in its focus on female desire and subjectivity.

Robb is not a queer theorist. Nevertheless, he tries to stake out a place for same-sex desire outside the homo/heterosexual divide: "Homo- and heterosexuality are concepts that bear the imprint of the periods in which they were invented.

But to say that no such dichotomy existed until these terms were coined is to sit on the dictionary and expect it to function as a magic carpet" (111). Eschewing a historiography that would emphasize only the most monumental twists and turns, Robb avoids creating a coherent "grand narrative" from the plethora of cultural and literary details he ranges among; instead, he draws together "curious fragments" of a "lost civilization," thrilling for any reader wishing to uncover a prototypical lesbian and gay tradition (35). There is an urgency (one that echoes second-wave feminism) behind filling out this spectral tradition insistently endangered by "the large number of known destructions (most presumably went unrecorded)" so that "at any moment in the nineteenth century someone, somewhere, was burning the papers of a homosexual relative" (137). Robb credits the inability to recognize "homosexuality" not only to a rigidifying of Foucault's dating of an epistemic shift but also to the ongoing homophobia of historians. There is thus a tension between Robb's "old-fashioned" investment in claiming "identity" and the militancy of such a claim accompanied by his somewhat unwittingly "queer" assertion of "presence": homosexuals have always existed and were and continue to be virtually everywhere.

For Kent, lesbians are "made" out of a number of historical circumstances in modernity; they are not "born." Thus the high percentage of lesbian prostitutes Robb locates in an 1839 brothel, for instance, would find themselves relocated under Kent's "queer" umbrella, which she uses to cover and account for nonnormative behavior that cannot be properly or strictly historicized. "'Queer,'" Kent writes, is a "transhistoric term that may include any act or protoidentity that exists outside the realm of bourgeois, heteronormative reproduction and its correlative ideology of gender roles. 'Queer' is not meant to carry the same politically radical connotations that it does when used in contemporary parlance: instead, I intend it to be understood as a term that is simultaneously oppositional and nonspecific, in a way that 'protolesbian' is not" (2). This important distinction allows Kent to have it two ways: she can disable the notion that "identifications and desires automatically lead to identities" (2) and, at the same time, can extract with almost hygienic precision a historically located "lesbian identity." In contrast to the disciplinary conditions of "protoidentity," "queer" migrates across temporal barriers and allows for a multiplicity of "oppositional" desires. In bracketing the homo/heterosexual divide, "queer" becomes the floating other of the normative. Within Kent's framework, Moore (figured as a latter-day spinster) creates, for example, an "alternative queer poetic subjectivity" (212) that appears to carry more appeal for Kent than the lesbian identification that subjects Bishop to the protocols of the closet.

In contrast to Kent, Robb strives to understate the mechanics of discipli-

nary power in controlling as well as recognizing sexual desire. Robb's training in French literature and history (his prior scholarship includes well-received biographies of Balzac, Hugo, and Rimbaud) leads him to imagine gay and lesbian lives in the nineteenth century, apart from the extraordinary visibility granted by the Wilde trial and later by the sexologists. He asks that we read history in evidence other than that provided by "epoch-making moments" that "rise up like volcanic peaks in the ocean of fact" (35).

While many of his most compelling anecdotes come from French literature and culture, Robb provides a panoramic overview of legal and medical discourse to make comparative distinctions. For instance, living in England under British law and the nation's "uninterrupted history of anti-sodomy legislation" is, perhaps expectedly, more oppressive than residing in France (19). Legal records and statistics, along with psychological case studies, supply the evidence for the rise of the homosexual, but Robb demonstrates how these documents can be overemphasized as well as used to overlook cultures of same-sex desire. Complicating the social responses to deviancy in the nineteenth century, one of Robb's most refreshing claims is that it was quite possible, even given the inability to concretize one's desires, to live an existence that was relatively "gay" (in both senses of the word). Many who engaged in "acts" could well have entertained "the idea that homosexuality might be a form of love, and that the desire to propagate the species was not the root of all romance" (76).

"The fact that the line between Romantic friendship and passionate love is hard to find does not mean that no line existed," Robb asserts, and proceeds with novelistic flair to present circumstances in which this line was crossed (115). Among his biographical "outings," he scrutinizes the composer Tchaikovsky, who came "closer than almost any other public figure to living an openly homosexual life" (127); Anne Lister, the 1820s lesbian "rake" whose sexual exploits Robb does not consider an "exceptional case," given that she seemed so adept at finding so many other "exceptional cases" to satisfy her desires (115); Goethe, not "hampered by the non-existence of the word" *homosexual* (93), who discovered that passionate friendship accompanied sexual expression through Johann Joachim Winkelmann's (1717–68) study of Greek art; the eighteenth-century household of the Ladies of Llangollen, whose exclusive "companionship" (as well as the circle of friends and visitors they cultivated) "were the acceptable face of that fashionable French scourge: Sapphism" (116); Hans Christian Andersen, patron saint of the queer fairy tale; and, as the book spills into the twentieth century, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, doubled in his homoerotic detective. In risking some anachronism through these outings, Robb points toward a queer reinterpretation of the closet.

From the legal perspective, the category of "homosexual identity" did not need to be congealed for same-sex desire to have palpable effects. "Sodomy was punishable by death in England and Wales until 1861," Robb writes, so that "many people lived their lives in the shadow of the gallows" (17). At the same time, he dispels the distorted perception that the Victorian age was the age of persecution and repression: "Punishment was rarely systematic and never a vital element of gay culture" (18). Just as the responses to Wilde's "gross indecency" should not be read as synonymous with the period as a whole, so too events such as the Vere Street Raid of 1810 are not the punitive signature of the times, considering that those rounded up and prosecuted for sodomy in this particular raid were nearly identical in number to those arrested for the entire year.

By examining yearly sodomy prosecution and conviction rates, Robb concludes that the nineteenth century was not as oppressive as the 1950s, a recognition shared by Abelove in his touchstone essay "New York City Gay Liberation," on the queer literati during the Cold War. In 1952 the American Psychiatric Association dubbed homosexuality an illness. (The most grim example Robb provides is of the mathematician Alan Turing, who, after being subjected to "conversion" therapies, killed himself in 1954.) While Robb does not create a new golden age of "identifications" before recognizable identities, he convincingly shows that neither "tolerance" of (cloaked by "the benevolent blind eye" to) deviant sexual behavior nor the "fear of being branded" was a newly invented mode of the late nineteenth century or a "recent phenomenon" (112). Coleridge, for instance, worried that his "romantic friendships" were too close to those of Shakespeare's evidently more erotically tinged ones (112), and "Shelley also tried" (with difficulty) "to locate the boundary between passion and appetite" and to erect "a cordon sanitaire" that might separate the "noble Greeks and Shakespeare" from the more decadent Romans (113). In these observations, Robb adumbrates a kind of trans-historical queer panic.

At times, I wonder if Robb's success in forging continuities between modernity and an earlier period is not due largely to his narrative agility, nowhere more evident than in a touchstone case from the early nineteenth century that includes versions of "coming out" and "queer bashing." While he regrets the lack of archival records from the lower classes, he maintains that the experience of the homosexual French aristocrat Astolphe de Custine "could give shivers of recognition to people who belonged to very different worlds" (85). Custine's mother, worried over his avoidance of marriage, wrote the novel *Olivier, ou le Secret* (1822), a kind of "parlour game" in which she never precisely names sodomy but invokes it through a "process of elimination" (86). A version of the closet (not yet invented)

emerges in Custine's own autobiographical (unsigned) novel, *Aloys* (1829), in which he despairs over his "false relations" and inauthenticity: "'Our life is an enigma to others, but their lives are an enigma to us, and our attempts to communicate with them are futile'" (87). Custine's "secret" was, in fact, "brutally revealed" when soldiers beat him up in a "lynching" (they shaved his head, tore off his clothes, and smashed his hand to remove his wedding ring) that "had the savage, ritualistic features of what would later be called 'queer-bashing'" (88). In all of this tragedy Robb finds redemption, for it is after this outing that Custine experienced "a kind of liberation" through which "everyone knew his secret" (88). As Robb's "happy ending" has it, Custine was able to share his house with male lovers, "entertained lavishly, corresponded widely and was admired by some of the greatest writers of the age, including Balzac, Stendhal and Baudelaire" (88). Anatomizing Custine's experience with a contemporary lexicon is a gesture akin to Kent's deployment of *queer* to designate transhistorical nonnormative identities, the province, after all, of Robb's revisionary history of life in the "shadows."

While Robb underplays Wilde as emblematic of a martyred homosexual identity, he nevertheless regards him as ushering in another age, much more repressive than "the maligned 19th century" (39). Even Gertrude Stein, arguably one of the most oblique writers when it came to her "natural" sexuality, had to admit the heightened anxiety that the Wilde trial delivered: "I had never conceived the possibility of anybody being in prison, anybody whose business it was not naturally because of natural or accidental crime to be in prison. . . . Oscar Wilde and the Ballad of Reading Gaol was the first thing that made me realise that it could happen, being in prison."[4] Robb claims that we need not imagine that "homosexuality" did not exist before the word was coined, yet he relies on its naming power, as does his title. Thus, even if men and women before 1868 had active, loving same-sex lives (not nearly as fearful of prosecution as other historians might suggest), they still seem to need the heft of modern taxonomy to historicize them. In spite of his rich archival bent, Robb's emphasis is on phenomena shared across periods, such as the persistent need to theorize sexual deviancy.

For Kent, lesbian identity is an effect of the disciplinary, "an identificatory erotics that was explicitly designed to control and regulate the female subject" (239). The anxieties surrounding "homosexual" as a signifier of disciplinary power are thus to some extent the backdrop for Kent's book. She carefully plays out the central paradox, that "identificatory erotics, although they may produce queer desires, . . . also seek to regulate and limit the subject" (238). She therefore cautions (in the spirit of Abelove's students) that lesbian identity risks producing its own "norms." In charting the "rise of lesbian identity," Kent strategically takes on

those who disparage nineteenth-century sentimental novels for their mass marketing of the normative heterosexual family, their preoccupation of making girls into mothers, for it is within such a framework that she finds the possibility and evidence of multiple identifications and desires.

Kent does for the spinster what Sedgwick has done for the nineteenth-century bachelor. As her first chapter delineates, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Oldtown Folks* ultimately provides the stigmatized figure of the spinster with an erotic mobility. What makes the spinster so important, of course, was her cultural placement outside the normative and naturalized forms of reproduction. Kent exposes how the cult of the "angel in the house," with its idealized version of mother and wife, flourished in an era where one-third of the female population, partly due to the losses incurred through the Civil War, would never marry (24). The escalation of industrial reproduction both threatened and reinforced the sacrosanct space of the home. According to Kent, there is a "key historical connection between serial production of commodities and serial production of individuals" where spinsters, whose labor is not confined to the domestic, function as "harbingers" of the mechanical and nonnormative body (236).

Kent highlights "the importance of space itself in the formation of identity and identification/desire" (15), particularly the period's newly established "semipublic/semiprivate" locations (the boardinghouse, the school, and the factory, as well as the space that the act of reading itself creates) where normative reproductive imperatives become unstable (16). It is especially in these locations that maternal figures, with their pedagogical mandate to make girls into women (whether the matron or spinster who might run the boardinghouse, the teacher in a girl's school, or later the Girl Scout leader or poetic mentor, in the case of Moore and Bishop), can become eroticized models and objects of desire. Jo March's successive identifications as a "boy," "literary spinster," and "mother/teacher" in *Jo's Boys* are not mutually exclusive.

Rejecting the "presymbolic, preconscious, and pre-ahistorical" by other theorists (82), Kent makes it clear that disciplinary "mothers" do not ultimately enact either the oedipal model of development, according to which girls must internalize the harsh superego that would punish nonnormative desire, or the identification with the mother that paves the way for an appropriate object love of the masculine. Rather, in the pedagogical and disciplinary scenarios Kent envisions, the desire to be the maternal can operate with the desire to have the female mother/others. To my mind, this represents a profound intervention in conceptions of psychosocial development: desire and identification need not be incompatible, as they are in oedipal logic. From this standpoint, Jo's subjectivity (like others in

Alcott's gymnasium) need not suffer from lack: "This is a masculine maternal in which having and being are indistinguishable. Jo never relinquishes her cross-gender identifications" (57). Somewhat troubling, however, is Kent's own transhistorical use of psychoanalysis to describe the ego formation of historicized "proto-identities."

Kent follows the "protolesbian" in the formation of the Girl Scouts, whose mission, like that of Alcott's novels, seems geared to exclusively mass-market normative identity but whose "disciplinary intimacy" facilitates other forms of "being" and "having." "Scouting, in setting up an intensely pedagogic structure," Kent elaborates, "risks that a girl may desire, rather than or along with wanting to *be*, her beloved 'Captain' or another idealized Scout, which might lead her to disidentify as Scout and identify instead as 'lesbian'" (113). Good girls may follow the manual's "promises" ("to do my duty to God and my country") and yet become bad girls. In fact, the Girl Scout manual becomes a modernist template (one never previously examined in this light, to my knowledge) so that Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* "parodies the genre of the handbook, celebrating even as it critiques a fantasy of lesbian recruitment that, in its efforts at 'making girls,' imitates the subject-forming conventions of such organizations as the Girl Scouts" (107). Perhaps most tantalizing, Kent finds the manual's domestic instructions transposed in Stein's avant-garde *Tender Buttons*, which reproduces an alternate lesbian ménage in which the naturalized "use" value of heterosexuality is openly deconstructed.

Kent's book perhaps too narrowly, if self-consciously, traces the roots of "lesbian identity" to white middle-class women in the institutions and pedagogical sites of boardinghouses, schools, and camps, where girls were literally engendered to fit the heteronormative models it was their mission to embody. Yet what of "protolesbian" lives that might exist outside such parameters? Are we to assume that these lives remain in a default queer category of "nonspecific" sexuality? Surely the roots of twentieth-century lesbian identity (as Robb intimates) are more multiple than those uncovered in the disciplinary or literary sites Kent surveys.

In a rather truncated analysis of the African American writer Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* (1881), Kent finds "the same sorts of eroticized disciplinary relations between women" that she finds in Alcott (89). This solitary text does little to augment our understanding of an alternate cultural rendering of "perverse" existence. Further, even if the middle class is bound to be more literate in reproducing identity formations, how are we to imagine the emergence of the working-class lesbian?

Persuasive as Kent's rendering of the Girl Scout phenomenon is, it begs the question of who is recruited and enlisted: whose bodies gain visibility or lose it through such a cultural institution and its transcription? I must confess that part of my fascination with Kent's writing on this subject stems from the fact that as a child I was unaccountably turned away from a recruitment table. After reading Kent's book, I now speculate that my experience had something to do with class as embodied by my waiflike, ragged demeanor, my single working-class mother. For while Kent notes that the Girl Scouts espoused openness to lower-class families, it did not foster recruitment of them: "Girl Scout fiction demonstrates that even when a troop befriends a working-class girl she is never fully assimilated into their peer group" (119). In fact, Kent cites a novel in which one poor child is segregated from the other children on a camping trip.

Finally, I wonder what more might be said of "female masculinity" (Judith Halberstam's well-known term) in the context of the "protolesbian"? While Kent attends to the taming (and ultimate reclaiming) of the "tomboy" and the "masculine maternal" in Alcott, there is a curious absence of paternal identifications. She mentions in passing Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* (admittedly an overtaxed text), yet in Kent's version of lesbian modernism there is little grappling with masculinity. Bryher (H. D.'s long-term lover) makes an appearance in the discussion of Moore, but nowhere does Kent allude to the epistemological trouble raised for this important transgendered modernist, who intermittently imagined "sex-change" and whose autobiographical novels reveal a childhood obsession with "boy adventure" books, potentially complementary to the girl books in which Alcott provided "training" to the female reader. In other words, by advancing Alcott as the inaugural figure in the "making" of lesbian identity, Kent risks, in spite of efforts to the contrary, elevating the maternal. In the end, however, she does the miraculous, emphasizing the queer in the almost paradigmatically domestic Alcott.

Abelove's *Deep Gossip* complements Kent's effort to refocus the American canon and New Historicism (which she rightly complains has too long gone without the insights of queer theory). One of Abelove's gifts lies in bringing seeming incongruous elements together: Thoreau with Queer Nation, writers like Bishop and O'Hara with New York's Gay Liberation Front (GLF); American studies with queer studies; and, as I have mentioned, a gay and lesbian tradition with queer politics. Where Robb and Kent link literary, social, and cultural phenomena to historicize a plurality of desires in the nineteenth century, Abelove provides neither a thoroughgoing history nor elaborate literary exegesis. Instead, he cogently offers models for practicing queer historicism. Much more than Robb or Kent,

Abelove wants to maintain the contemporary political significance of *queer* (which, we remember, Kent explicitly rules out of her particular use of the term). In other words, destabilizing history for Abelove can (and possibly should) be an act of queer militancy.

A case in point is Abelove's pointed examination of the misrepresentation and distortion of Freud's views of male homosexuality by American psychoanalysts. His argument hinges on a compassionate letter written to a panic-struck American mother in 1935, in which Freud declared that homosexuality, while not an "'advantage,'" is "'nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness'" (1–2). As early as 1916 the American transplanting of psychoanalysis marked it with a puritanical moralism entirely at odds, Abelove points out, with Freud's crucial assessment that "everybody's sexuality was homosexual in large part" (17). Echoing and foregrounding Freud's overarching assertion, Abelove interrogates the stability of a sexual terminology dependent on "center" and "margin." This kind of historical demystification for the purpose of a liberatory sexual discourse, compacted in swift yet unelliptical prose, distinguishes *Deep Gossip*.

Abelove's abbreviated historical method is evident in another context when he extracts from an entire century—the "long eighteenth century," no less—the heightened popularity of a particular kind of "so-called" sexual intercourse ("penis in vagina, vagina around penis, with seminal emission uninterrupted" [27]), confirmed (as it were) by statistics that denote a radical rise of fertility and population. "Diverse cross-sex sexual behaviors," he muses, reduce to the compulsory "foreplay" (27). I am stimulated to think about other influences on the rise in population (such as childbirth mortality rates, colonial exploration, and panic over sexual diseases), but for Abelove (and this is in part an endearing flaw), the "deduction is irresistible" (23). The rise in capitalist production incites a rise in reproduction, so that "non-reproductive sexual behaviors [come] under extraordinary and ever-intensifying negative pressure" (26). (This also accounts for the increased pressure on the figure of the spinster, as Kent explores.)

Deep Gossip is not meant to be an exhaustive history of homosexuality of either the eighteenth or the nineteenth century, yet at times Abelove's sweeping historicist gestures make his arguments appear superficial, less persuasive, more intuitive than fully realized. (One can imagine, for instance, eighteenth-century critics reeling in consternation at Abelove's global reading of the period's sexual practices.) At the same time, his essays can be read as "queer" interventions, effective in their flashing brevity, meant to open up accepted or reified histories, to

offer other readers and critics spaces or gaps in which to destabilize conventional historiographies further.

One notable example of this inciting rhetoric addresses the heart of the matter I have already touched on: how to reconcile the queer critic with the historicist. These two, as Abelove conjoins, were wedded in F. O. Matthiessen, often dubbed the "father" of American studies but less acknowledged for his intensive queering of it. Matthiessen's groundbreaking *American Renaissance* was celebrated but not greeted, Abelove speculates, with unqualified approval: "I speak generally, of course, and according to my impressions. Reading their tributes, their congratulations, in letters and speeches and reviews, I notice some edginess, some reserve, even some wariness" (62). Behind this "wariness," Abelove continues, "is a sense of an erotic focus in the book," with its dedication to two male friends, with its "select cast of characters—Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Emerson—the first three of whom were then, as they are now, particularly amenable to appropriation by gay readers in search of predecessors" (62). If "the explicit theme is the culture of democracy in mid-nineteenth-century America," *American Renaissance* also poses "the question the book frames without asking: what was the erotic meaning of that democracy[?]" (62). Abelove brings to the surface the homoerotic undercurrents in Matthiessen's work (the erotics of mid-nineteenth-century nation building is also exposed in Kent's book), offering us a wedge into the heterosexualizing of democracy and a way to reiterate an "unasked question": "If we could know that erotic dynamic, would we know something pertinent to the tasks of improving and deepening and expanding and advancing and even reconstructing democracy in the present?" (63). This is the cue for queer studies, aligned with democracy, to move away from the historical margins to occupy a refurbished center.

Matthiessen's tragic suicide (after the loss of his closeted nearly lifelong lover and his mistreatment by colleagues and students at Harvard University for his socialism and activism during the Cold War) sets the stage for Abelove's culminating essay on a set of writers coming of age in the 1950s (Bishop, O'Hara, Ginsberg, Paul Bowles, Jane Bowles, James Baldwin, Paul Goodman, and Ned Rorem), whom he calls "commuter queers," forced into exile by Cold War homophobic sweeps not only of gay bars but of employment quarters like libraries, government offices, and the academy (79). Here we are treated to a series of demystifying statistics (much like those that Robb uses to ground his study). President Eisenhower outlawed all employment of gay people in the federal government, and some state and local authorities followed suit. The Library of Congress was a dan-

gerous place for queer employees; it conducted over two thousand investigations in less than ten years and fired approximately ten queers. Often without wanting to be, the writers Abelove draws together were an important resource for the formation of the GLF. What makes this link resound is a reminder that the GLF "was not predicated on a commitment to a supposititiously stable or definite identity" but "on a commitment to a worldwide struggle for decolonization and its potential human benefits" (88). "GLFers" found, Abelove elaborates, a remarkable correlative for their own concerns in these New York writers, who in turn were connected by their increasing realization (usually during self-imposed exiles from the United States) of the overlay between their queer identities and colonized others. This last point once again (as with the case of Matthiessen) depends somewhat on "impressions" rather than facts or a full-fledged tracing of influence. This is perhaps a felicitous loosening of the grip of absolute historical contiguity and "proof" of queer affiliations.

Abelove engages in queer historicism, but, unlike Kent, he is more adamantly concerned with keeping the "politically radical connotations" that *queer* evokes. It is with this kind of political connotation that he speculates in "From Thoreau to Queer Politics" that "Walden was the first queer action" (34) in its valorization of "life outside the discourses of domesticity" (37). Abelove lucidly recasts the disdain that Thoreau elicited from the larger community (literary and physical) as stemming from his "selfish" refusal of marriage and family values, along with his "queer" mentorship of boys.

We might think of the moments of erotic tutelage uncovered by Kent in Alcott when we read Abelove's account of Thoreau's "collaborative reading scene" with the French Canadian woodchopper who comes to visit and is subsequently mentored in reading a passage from the *Iliad* about Achilles and Patroclus, who "according to a famous and long-standing tradition of interpretation" are lovers (36). Yet unlike Alcott, Thoreau was creating the "anti-novel," pitted against the genre embedded in "family news" (37). Certainly, Thoreau suffered much of the social ostracism also meted out to spinsters (as Kent details), but we are meant to regard his separatism as self-conscious "choosing" and even queer "activism."

The transition between Thoreau and Abelove's recounting of his sabbatical leave in Salt Lake City, where he belonged to a local chapter of Queer Nation, is intriguing, if somewhat tenuous. The brash, eccentric Thoreau provides a clue to the group's "puzzling" elements of "commitment to actions, the preference for the language of nationhood," and the preference of the word *queer* to *gay and lesbian* (33). The "commitment to visibility mixed with outrage and humor" certainly bears the lineaments of Thoreau (33). But it is precisely the move toward "action"

that dynamizes the connection. While Queer Nation may show "relatively little interest in lesbian/gay civil rights," there is, for instance, "a lively interest in producing actions in response to homophobic incidents" (34). The group resists then foundational identity claims of marginality and oppression by claiming presence, most famously attending an Academy Awards ceremony and chanting: "We're here, we're queer, we're fabulous, and we designed everything you're wearing!"

"An action," as Abelove sums it up, "is a way of trying to do what is politically salient while countering, often sensationally, the ennui produced by the disruption of the discourses of family, love, marriage, and while also performing or acting a claim to centrality" (40). If identity is performative, the leap into the center is a matter of relentless cultural reinterpolation, part of a queer historicist impulse to review the past with an eye for the many places that a heterosexist reading of culture breaks down. Echoing his essay on his queer students, Abelove enjoins: "We who are queer do not yet fully believe our own claims to centrality," which are "at least as cogent as are our more familiar claims to marginalization" (40–41).

Tracing unexpected links leads Abelove to several correctives: among them, he asserts that "the well-established social-historical practice of always focusing up close on an object of study" is not always the best procedure; "sometimes the best way to apprehend an object may be to look away from it, to the sources that shape or produce it, even if they are distant—as distinct as Tangier [where Paul Bowles 'commuted'] or Rio is from the Hudson" (88). This is a generative, generous methodology. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the student queer population of Wesleyan University, at least as one important community that lends itself to Abelove's diffuse cultural extrapolation, is primarily an upper-class, privileged one. Thus, when Abelove's students repudiate the discourse of marginalization that they see in much of gay and lesbian history, they are doing so from a profoundly specific position: "They do not typically experience their own subjectivity as marginal, even at those moments when they feel most oppressed by homophobic and heterosexist discourses and institutions" (45). Class might play a role in this sense of queer entitlement (just as it might have operated in the Girl Scouts). Abelove also gives little attention to race (excepting a brief discussion of Baldwin). For that matter, based on the three books under review, it would seem that homosexual and queer existence is primarily the province of the white upper and middle classes.

Each of these studies implies that queer bodies could both "be" and "have" presence during periods of heightened homophobic ideologies as well as in times that had not fully theorized homosexual identity. Yet Abelove calls into

question "meticulously detailed" accounts (88) of a particular phenomenon (thus perhaps leading to his efforts to move across large terrains while picking up the murmurs of "gossip"); in other words, he asks us to rethink the "disciplinary" mechanisms of New Historicism and what might be excluded by performing its pedagogy too well. The paradox remains: if to name is to claim embodied identities, then to name is also to make bodies available for discipline and surveillance.

These three books encourage readers to test a double endeavor: to be historically specific as well as to produce queer readings of cultural texts before Stonewall. How can gay and lesbian "tradition," in all its details, be queered? Robb, for instance, highlights a plurality of details, the lost and found of nonnormative identities, although he often collapses these under the evidently unsatisfactory category of the "homosexual." Abelove's "queer historicism" is a drive toward bridging the taxonomies of *queer* and *identity*. Kent alternatively historicizes the "protolesbian," while *queer* becomes "a term that is simultaneously oppositional and non-specific" (2). *Queer* is a word, however, that incites us to examine forms of deviancy that predate or outrun twentieth-century taxonomy, a profoundly difficult task for a cultural historian. In spite of the limits of "identity," it is, if nothing else, for these three books a necessary "strategic" position. Similarly, we need to take Sedgwick's point in *Tendencies* to heart: any definition of queerness needs to acknowledge the significance of homosexuality to its definition.[5] Otherwise, in another century, historians may look back at *queer* and be baffled by the word's strategic universalism, its delight in identifications and "trying all kinds."

Notes

1. Bruce R. Smith, "Premodern Sexualities," *PMLA* 115 (2000): 319.
2. Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 18.
3. Ibid., 11.
4. Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (London: Batsford, 1945), 32.
5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).