

Part I

Practices, Identities, Communities

1

The Trouble with Harry Thaw

Martha M. Umphrey

On the one hand, this story is an archetypal tragedy: a heterosexual love triangle gone sour. On June 25, 1906, a young playboy murdered a celebrated New York architect and bohemian over a beautiful girl. Harry Thaw, son of a Pittsburgh railroad and mining magnate, shot Stanford White dead in the rooftop theatre of White's own creation, the old Madison Square Garden, because White had "ruined" Thaw's young wife Evelyn Nesbit, a well-known model and member of the famous Florodora Sextet, by "deflowering" her before marriage, perhaps violently. For the murder scandal of the (young) century Thaw was tried twice, ultimately declared insane in 1907, then released in 1915 – to widespread public approval – as a man of honor pursued unfairly by an overzealous system. Usually the story ends there.

On the other hand, the stock narrative in this melodrama of honor masks a much more complex configuration of sexual relations. If seduction and violence did mark the first sexual encounter between the sixteen-year-old Nesbit and the forty-eight-year-old White (in the form of a much-contested and recanted story of Nesbit's drugging and rape), theirs was a relationship also constituted and ultimately sustained for several years by White's paternalistic concern for Nesbit's health, education, and financial welfare and by an apparently genuine passion between them, fueled by an aestheticized eroticism.¹ And as for Harry Thaw – he was trouble. A man who claimed injury as a

wronged husband, his own sexual escapades crossed boundaries of sex and age and often confused tenderness and violence. In this article I would like to muse upon the trouble that Thaw has given me as a historian of sexuality and the trouble he makes more generally for the project of lesbian/gay history.

In her 1934 autobiography *Prodigal Days*,² Evelyn Nesbit describes two brushes with male homosexuality. The first concerns Thaw, from whom she had been divorced:

Then, in New York between seasons, we were shocked to open the papers, one morning, and read the glaring exposure of Thaw's sadistic cruelty to the Gump boy. Thaw had enticed the seventeen-year-old youth – who, the newspapers said, resembled me – to his secluded suite at the McAlpin, and there induced him to take a bath. Then Thaw, whose advancing paranoia had undoubtedly brought him to the stage where girls no longer interested him, had disrobed the hapless youth and beaten him unmercifully. The newspaper photographs of Gump's body were sickening, Thaw had forced the tortured boy to his knees, made him kiss his feet and call him "Master." Gump had tried to hurl himself out the seventeenth-story window.³

Only ten pages later Nesbit describes another scene, one involving a "young, gentle boy" named Jackie whom she asks to "park . . . on one of the couches" in her home until she overcomes her nervousness after an attack by thugs. Her

second husband Jack Clifford, attempting to find cause for divorce action, has been “spying” on her from across the street.

Clifford soon detected the fact that Jackie slept somewhere on the premises. One night he broke in with several witnesses. For a few moments there was wild confusion as the witnesses, groping about in the dark, knocked over a table, scattering silverware over the floor, and scaring Jackie half to death. He promptly threw a fit of hysterics, shrieking:

“My sainted aunt! My reputation is ruined! The boys will swear I’ve been having an affair with a woman! They’ll think I’ve turned queer! Oh, no! What shall I do?” And he swooned.

The witnesses laughingly advised Clifford never to produce this “man” as evidence in a divorce action.⁴

In the first scene, male homosexuality is figured simultaneously as a set of attributes (Thaw’s sadistic cruelty), a condition of developing perversion emerging from madness (his advancing paranoia), and a series of manipulative and violent acts (enticement, disrobing, beating, forced submission). In the second, male homosexuality is an identity established through social relations: the “pansy,” the “quiet, gentle boy,” inscribed in a male homosexual milieu built upon reputation and mutual recognition, unrecognizable in the public sphere of legal action as a “man” because he does not participate in a heterosexual economy of affairs, spy raids, and divorce actions.⁵

In the first, attributes, conditions, acts; in the second, identity. Taken together, these scenes pose certain difficult questions about the proper parameters of the practice of lesbian/gay history. What do we look for? What do we see? How might our historical methods produce certain meanings about homosexual identity or behavior, and how might other meanings be excluded in that very process of production? As a matter of lesbian/gay history, how should we approach the far reaches and intermittent eruptions of same-sex acts in any given historical moment?

This article is meant to be a brief theoretical musing, rather than a historical exploration, of the questions and tensions embodied in Nesbit’s

vignettes. Within this symptomatic reading of specific moments in her narrative, one might consider Jackie as a historically identifiable gay male subject, self-identified, inscribed within a locatable homosexual subculture, a campy queen, parodying femininity in a self-conscious, recognizable performance. He can fear being “queered” into straightness because his identity *is* stable. As a historian (if I can substantiate Nesbit’s account) I can find and recuperate Jackie as a forebear, a sign that “we” as homosexuals were there just as we are here now, perhaps differently constructed (pansy, not queen⁶), but nonetheless historical agents whose sexual lives, once unveiled, in some sense enable and justify our own.⁷ Whether homosexuality is innate or socially constructed, Jackie (or someone like Jackie about whom we have more information) can relatively accurately be identified as a gay man in modern New York City.⁸

But what of Harry Thaw? Given that he engaged in same-sex sexualized activity, can or should he be a “proper” object of study for historians of homosexuality, and if so in what way? And what does finding Harry Thaw do to lesbian/gay history? His presence as a sexual outlaw, neither precisely straight nor precisely gay, tests the parameters of lesbian/gay history and even, perhaps, “queer” history (the definition of which I’ll take up later). Is he situated sexually and culturally in such a way as to be a part of “our” history? As a rich playboy who married Nesbit, murdered White, escaped execution with an insanity plea, took pleasure in whipping not only Nesbit and Gump but also (at least allegedly) many others, he may be an unsavory ancestor for many, uneasily situated near the project of lesbian/gay history and easily erased (perhaps with relief).

No doubt about it: Harry Thaw was and is trouble. But as Judith Butler has impishly suggested, “trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.”⁹ To countenance Thaw as a legitimate subject for lesbian/gay historians is to pose difficult questions about, and to trouble the assumptions embedded in, our methodological stances. More often than not, lesbian/gay historians participate in a model of history that relies on the recuperation and celebration of homosexual subjectivity and thus implicitly promotes a

partial view of the history of sexuality. Where we locate identity, we can find oppression; where we locate oppression, we can find resistance. This analytical move is crucial to the politics of an antihomophobic history, but it remains caught in a binary logic that, if left uncontested, will always and only accord gay men and lesbians “minority” status. By making the marked half of the hetero/homosexual binary visible, we paradoxically gain recognition while constantly reinscribing the terms of our own disempowerment in reified identity categories. As such, the identity politics that has been so crucial to the birth of a specific lesbian/gay history of sexuality, essential as a foundation from which to ask questions about compulsory heterosexuality and homosexual resistance, must be simultaneously supplemented by a critical history of sexuality that unpacks the assumptions that inform the very construction of that foundation.¹⁰ Harry Thaw as the impossible subject of lesbian/gay history refuses the binary politics of identity, calling into question the completeness of a historiographic gesture based upon stable identity categories as epistemological foundations for history.

I say that Thaw is an impossible subject for lesbian/gay history. Yet initially I became interested in the Thaw trials partly *because* Thaw was rumored to be homosexual. Rumor always engenders naive fascination, and once one is in the thick of things, plunged into a project, one then becomes responsible for grappling with conundrums and contradictions revealed as the fog clears. If my recuperable gay man transmogrifies into a site of incoherent and indeterminate sexual identity, that isn't his fault.

But perhaps it is in the end to my benefit that Thaw is so slippery a character; by exploding easy categories, by raising the possibility of a homosexualized subplot, his unstable presence can help to reveal the overdetermined and constructed nature of this very heterosexual melodrama. Having posed that possibility, let me step back to narrate the phenomenological path I followed as I tried to characterize his place in my larger work on the intersections of gender, sexuality, madness, and criminal law; I will then move to a broader discussion of the implications of queer theory for lesbian/gay history.

Harry Thaw as a Gay Man

I didn't exactly go looking for a gay man when I began working on the Thaw trials, but alerted by quiet yet clear allusions in various secondary works to Thaw's interest in “both sexes,”¹¹ I began envisioning him as gay, as someone whose primary sexual interests might lie with men, whose marriage was a masquerade of those desires. “Gay” in this context functions to some extent as metaphor, making an identity of certain same-sex (but not always same-sex) practices – a projection of desire on my part for a story lost to history, suppressed by the fragile propriety of other historians. The story of Thaw's homosexuality, I naively thought, might be his “true” story, closeted by post-trial public constructions of Thaw as a man of honor avenging his wife's sexual ruin at the hands of a beast. Or it might be the clue that would unlock the puzzle of Thaw's madness: perhaps repressing a shadow-life broke his mind. Even if Thaw weren't Oscar Wilde, weren't truly and completely gay, perhaps he should be labeled bisexual, someone whose desire for other men was partly, if inconsistently, constitutive of his identity.

Much of this was speculative early thinking, making Thaw's same-sex relations into something talismanic, beguiling. Without much evidence, I layered Thaw with displaced identities and insincere actions in the name of antihomophobic history. Further, this tack presupposed certain categories of identity (homosexual, bisexual) as stable and coherent, when in fact Thaw is a prime example of their very instability and incoherence. His obsession with Evelyn Nesbit and his occasional forays into homosexual sadism belie any overreading of his identity as that of “a homosexual,” however one might define that term.

Harry Thaw as Sadist

Having discarded sexual object-choice as the best means of understanding Thaw's identity, I began to attend to Thaw's behavior, which more obviously labeled him a sadist than a homosexual. Nesbit herself dwelled upon that behavior at length in *Prodigal Days*, most vividly in her

chapter "Nightmare of Sadism," in which she describes Thaw's attack with a horsewhip while the two were staying in the secluded and gothic Schloss Katzenstein, somewhere in Austria.¹² Explicitly invoking the Marquis de Sade, she describes in almost pornographic detail his entry into her room one night, stark naked, his glassy dilated eyes, his lashing of her body, his nails in her flesh. When the attack ended he asserted in words what he had already asserted in deed: "You are too impudent. You are entirely too impudent. I had to punish you. . . . If we were living in ancient times, you would be my slave." Immediately after that scene Nesbit discovers Thaw masturbating (she can only call it a "disgusting habit" or "vicious pleasure"¹³). Nesbit later attributes Thaw's rage to cocaine addiction and suggests that his masturbation might have contributed to his insanity.¹⁴

In this passage Thaw's sexuality thus seemed to revolve more around assertions of power and the retention of control over his objects of desire, even as those assertions of power required simultaneously a loss of control, a frenzy. His sexuality and his violent disposition thus intertwined, it was easy for me to follow Nesbit in claiming a moral high ground. If Nesbit could easily explain Thaw's sadism with drug addiction, I could just as easily explain it with a feminist analysis of gender relations. Thaw's obsessive jealousy of Nesbit's relations with White and other men, his need to force her submission, his interest in younger, relatively disempowered men (whom he offered to "educate"¹⁵) all inscribe him within a gendered narrative in which power is related to masculinity and violence. "I would be a prince," he said to Nesbit, "and you would dance and serve me, wearing bracelets and anklets."¹⁶

This kind of analysis, though, is a kind of photographic negative of my naive recuperative stance in its ethical certainty. If Thaw as a "homosexual" was a positive historical find when viewed only through the lens of lesbian/gay history, someone to be rescued from approbation and situated within "our" genealogy, then Thaw as a sadist was a find in a slightly different sense when captured through the lens of feminism: someone who could be analyzed critically as a man obsessed with power over a woman whose own much-circulated image held

extraordinary sway over a fascinated public. Both interpretations make more of Thaw than he himself was. Further, my stance toward this material made it impossible for me to separate artificially a recuperative lesbian/gay from a critical feminist point of view.¹⁷ Gender and sexuality, though by no means coextensive, are in fact inextricably entangled (at least as they are currently constituted).¹⁸ Yet the moral weights of each pulled in opposite directions. Was Harry Thaw a hero or beast? What if he were both? Ironically, hasn't that been the question about Harry Thaw all along, both to his contemporaries and to me?

The Libertine, the Pervert, the Madman

Perhaps to escape the heavy moralism of both positions, I decided to look more closely at historically specific typologies of Thaw's behavior. Thaw seemed to fit well, for example, in the shoes of the eighteenth-century rake or libertine, a manly man interested in both women and boys. According to Randolph Trumbach, libertines who engaged in homosexual intercourse were nonetheless not "homosexual" in the sense of the "molly," the eighteenth-century English precursor to the "queen." In fact, Trumbach argues, "they were secretly held in awe for the extremity of their masculine self-assertion, since they triumphed over male and female alike."¹⁹ His masculinity bolstered by sadistic practices, Thaw surely might have identified more with the libertine than the homosexual, particularly the "homosexual" figured by Jackie.

The "libertine," though a label historically misplaced, is by its very multiplicity and fluidity able to capture more of the sexually transgressive character of Thaw's life. By the early twentieth century, Thaw was described by Nesbit and others not as a libertine but as a pervert.²⁰ Unlike Jackie, more properly labeled an "invert" in turn-of-the-century medical terminology because of his inherent homosexuality, Thaw could be labeled a "pervert" because his homosexual behavior was lust-driven.²¹ More broadly, Nesbit linked Thaw's perversion to his sadism (with both men and women) and masturbation, breezily parroting popular psychoanalytic discourse on "sex abnormalities."²²

Both the libertine and the pervert are defined by virtue of their excessive sexuality, their polymorphous and uncensored relationship to desire, fantasy, and enactment.²³ It is no wonder, then, that such excess flowed easily into constructions of madness; “the unexplained extravagances of a sexual pervert,” wrote Dr. Allan McLane Hamilton in 1896, “may raise the question of insanity.”²⁴ Ironically, although Harry Thaw was indeed acquitted of Stanford White’s murder on the basis of insanity, that acquittal was based not on a narrative of Thaw’s excesses, but (at least partly) on a narrative of White’s. Thaw claimed that he shot “the beast” in order to rid New York of a “moral pervert” who had ravished young girls and ruined his wife,²⁵ and in his first trial he tried to rely on the “unwritten law” that allowed juries to acquit a wronged husband (the trial ended with a hung jury). Indeed, Thaw became a popular hero in the eyes of many who endorsed his act as a defense of honor.²⁶

Harry Thaw as a libertine, a pervert, or a madman – the specificity of these discursive identity categories stands Thaw in oblique relation to the hetero/homo dyad I had initially imposed on him. But if I had not envisioned Thaw as a gay man at the outset, would I have seen these more specific identities that lurk in the shadows of lesbian/gay history? What kind of historiographic stance might both do justice to this specificity of Thaw’s excesses and transgressions, while underscoring the ways in which Thaw’s practices unravel his own insistence on a particularly normative heterosexuality? It seems to me that Thaw is *not* “obviously” gay in the way lesbian/gay history imagines its objects of recuperation, but that a history of Thaw and his sexual practices could also be a history that, broadly speaking, locates a refusal of compulsory heterosexuality.

QUEER [of doubtful origin]

- 1 Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character. Also, of questionable character, suspicious, dubious.
- 2 (Thieves’ cant.) Bad; worthless.
- 3 a. To quiz or ridicule; to puzzle. b. To impose on, swindle, cheat.
- 4 To spoil, put out of order.²⁷

Although few instances of the word “queer” exist before 1700, the term long predates the

confrontational gay and lesbian politics of the 1980s and 1990s and the insult appropriated by those politics. The word’s classic definition is not explicitly political, though it contains an incipient politics by describing a process of making the normal strange. None of the classic definitions is a noun. Rather, as an adjective, “queer” describes a process of “queering,” a distorting, a making the solid unstable. Or at most a condition of queerness; when Jackie exclaims “The boys will think I’ve turned queer!” he means: they will think I’ve shifted, I’ve been spoiled, I’ve become something other to what they thought was my real being.

In that sense, to talk about “queerness” is to talk about a relation between something perceived to be solid or stable and its destabilization into something else. The “solid” need not be the “normal” and the something else need not be the “pathologized.” Rather, the solid is the commonly understood, the taken-for-granted in any given context, standing in relation to its distortion. One focuses not on the identities of those labeled normal and those labeled abnormal, but on the oblique relation between two (or more) identities, positions, or practices that have no certain and timeless definition or content. To see Jackie turning queer requires that one perceive a relationship between the supposed stability of his homosexual identity and its distortion by a heterosexual encounter into something else, something not quite heterosexual. Thus, the “queered” position is related to and dependent upon the stable position, rather than being a separate position in itself. It undermines the stability of the primary term and opens up the possibility that the solid has never been solid at all.

To theorize queerness in relation to lesbian/gay history is thus to move away from a history of stable identity categories. On one level, such a project is not new; it is suggested by work in lesbian/gay history that emphasizes the historically contingent and discursive nature of identity categories and the invented nature of “the homosexual.” As Foucault has argued compellingly in *The History of Sexuality*, sexual identity is constructed within and by discursive fields; sexuality is (in Judith Butler’s formulation) a historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity.²⁸ “The

homosexual” as such is an invented, not innate, characterization of specific organizations of sexual behavior. In that Foucauldian sense, Harry Thaw could be neither a “true” homosexual nor a “true” heterosexual, naturally and innately; for that matter, neither could Jackie. Rather, Jackie’s identity as a “pansy” was a product or effect of certain early twentieth-century medico-legal and popular discourses about homosexuality as a congenital defect or a result of incomplete sexual development.

Even beyond historicizing identity, though, “[t]he task,” as Judith Butler formulates Foucault’s position, “is to call into question the explanatory gesture that requires a true identity and, hence, a mistaken one.”²⁹ Jennifer Terry, in her article “Theorizing Deviant Historiography,” takes up that project in calling for new methodological practices that attempt not to rediscover lost homosexuals, but to trace “deviant subject formation.”³⁰ This deviant history, according to Terry, “exposes not the events and actors elided by traditional history, but instead lays bare the processes and operations by which these elisions occur” to theorize a “counterdiscursive position of history-telling which neither fashions a new coherence, nor provides a more inclusive resolution of contradicting ‘events.’”³¹

Instead of positing a fixed deviant subject position, the archivist finds a provisional position corresponding to a discursively fashioned outlawed or pathologized sexual identity – the location from which a resistant historiography can be generated.³²

Terry exposes the process of deviant subject formation by reading the texts of elite discourses subversively, attentive to rupture and discontinuity, in search of signs of deviance. Specifically, her readings of a 1930s study of “sex variants” (i.e., homosexuals) emphasize the *process* of identity construction that occurs as medical experts and the objects of their study interact. She analyzes the ways in which expert interpretations of the appearance and behavior of various lesbians and gay men are consciously subverted by the characterizations lesbians and gay men give themselves. As such, although Terry does not use the term, her work explores

the ways in which these “sex variants” *queer* the experts’ interpretations of them, resist their pathologizing tendencies, and distort their rigidly constructed taxonomies of sex variance. “Deviance” becomes defined implicitly as emerging from the dialogized meanings produced by the intersection of pathologizing medical discourses and the self-consciously resistant counter-discourses of homosexual subjects.

Yet Terry narrows her reading of the “deviant” from the outlawed or pathologized (a definition of deviance she produces that is broad enough to include someone like Harry Thaw) to the homosexual subject that resists pathologization. Thus, she veers back to a politics of identity and resistance that still requires homosexual subjectivity to be imagined as stable and coherent, if differentiated along the lines of gender, race, class, and age. As a result, Terry’s formulation of deviant historiography requires a level of self-conscious resistance that Thaw does not and cannot evince because he does not belong to the discursively constructed category “homosexual.”

The problem remains: Harry Thaw is a man who engaged in same-sex relations, but cannot be assimilated into even the broadest of current historiographic models. If both lesbian/gay history and deviant historiography explore the history of homosexual subjectivity, then Harry Thaw makes trouble for both those models, destabilizing the discursive categories that either I or his contemporaries might impose upon him. Thaw was, one might say, a queer one: strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric. Unfixable and unidentifiable as a homosexual, both to contemporaries and to historians, he is at best a dubious subject for lesbian/gay history – hardly one to recuperate for his conscious resistance to homophobic oppression. To engage Harry Thaw, one must redirect one’s attention from the search for lesbian/gay identity toward a reexamination of the coherence of those discursively constructed identity categories in and of themselves.

Given Thaw’s poor fit with heterosexual/homosexual identity categories, perhaps he should be recharacterized as a sexual outlaw, one outside the law in two senses: he violated social mores by standing outside medico-legal prohibitions against excess in sexuality and violence,

and he stood outside the politico-historiographic laws of identity formation, which require a self-conscious association with the group subject to historical excavation. Of dubious character, Thaw made no defense of “the love that dare not speak its name”; he injected the horror of nonconsensual violence into a potentially subversive sexuality; his only self-consciousness was of his own class privilege (“I am Harry Thaw of Pittsburgh,” he used to say at every introduction, as if that was justification enough for any behavior). Outside the laws of justice and history, Harry Thaw was and is a swindler and, not the least, a swindler of lesbian/gay history – one who catches us off guard, then slips away.

The point, then, cannot be to capture Thaw within or banish him from “our” history. To do so would be to impose upon him an identity composed by our own ethical choices; though they are opposite gestures, both capture and banishment replicate the logic of identity politics that Thaw escapes. Rather, the point must be to call that very logic into question without losing sight of Thaw’s connection to the politics of sexuality.

A history of sexuality inflected with queer theory can grapple with such questions. The term “queer” undoes itself, refuses a set taxonomy or stable definition. Its politics emerge from the immorality and shame woven into the word itself, just as shame is felt in the body down to one’s very sinews and bones. As a political weapon, the word itself has been queered from the wholly approbative and insulting to the celebrated and deployed, a “sly and ironic weapon.”³³ If it can be an identity at all, it is a doubled identity: the shamed and the transformative (mis)appropriation of that shame.³⁴ Yet more aptly, the word is an adjective or verb, not a noun; it is strange or making strange, of questionable character or the performing of that questionable character.

Although one can claim queerness as an identity emerging out of a specific politics, can narrate the stories of other queers, can join Queer Nation, and so on, nothing in the term itself *prescribes* the content of that identity; in fact the term is defined by its very instability, its excess. Indeed, “queer identity” is in itself paradoxical because queerness is dependent upon

fracturing the very notion of identity, including a monolithic and unproblematized lesbian/gay identity. Identity instead is envisioned as variable, provisional, constructed; queerness signals the fluidity and contingency of deviance, a broad category of outlawry that is defined in relation to the “normal” in any specific historical moment, rather than a positive identity in itself. Similarly, although one can celebrate queerness or queering just as one can celebrate lesbian/gay identity, nothing in the term *requires* celebration for the politics of queerness to be effective. In other words, queer history can queer the celebratory politics of lesbian/gay history; out of that queering can come a hard-boiled history, one with no *necessary* moral center, posing new questions and revealing different sexual practices in the name of exploding compulsory heterosexuality.³⁵

To that extent, perhaps such a history might better be termed a “queered” history so as to underscore its processual or adjectival nature, a mode of reasoning that stands in relation to sexuality much as “feminist” stands to “woman.” So envisioned, a queered history can keep in view the paradoxes and complexities, indeed the historical specificity of sexual practices, so as to reveal contestation within categories of sexual identity even as it promotes antihomophobic inquiry. As such, a queered history takes instability and scandal as its subjects. It can thus accommodate the outlawry of Harry Thaw because it does not require a stable, self-conscious homosexual identity as its political foundation; it only requires a refusal to respect the laws of compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, the self-consciousness embedded in queered history is not necessarily the self-consciousness of the historical subject,³⁶ but that of the historian interested in tracing the history of sexual outlawry as a way to critique homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality.³⁷

Of what might queered histories consist, beyond biographies of sexual outlaws? To the extent that “queerness” escapes the logic of identity, queered histories might be histories of sexual practices that stand in an oblique relation to the “normal” or “natural.” More generally, queered history might be conceived as a history of scandal and its consequences: a history of rumor; a history of blackmail; a history of lust

and its particular inscriptions in medico-legal discourses; a history of excess and its masquerades. In Harry Thaw's case, for example, one might inquire into how the overdetermined nature of his public obsession with masculine honor and moral propriety functions as a particular kind of masquerade for the sexual outlaw's private vices. One might examine society scandal sheets to explore the circulation and effect of rumors on subsequent legal interpretations of Thaw's character. One might explore the repression of sexuality in contemporaneous accounts of Thaw's sadism (the excerpts from Nesbit's book, for example, allude to, but ultimately elide, the sexual content of Thaw's attacks). Or one might trace the relationship between constructions of sexual excess and constructions of insanity as they intersect in the notion of perversion. And from a confluence of these kinds of inquiries might flow the ultimate in queered historical projects: critical histories of heterosexuality.

Fundamentally, doing queered history is a scandalous project in itself. Queering history means acknowledging that the processes of history are unstable, the search for exemplary historical subjects always incomplete. It requires on our part a constant re-engagement, a constant questioning of our own assumptions about the "proper" subject of history. As Butler has suggested,

If the term "queer" is to be a site of collective contestation, a point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. . . .³⁸

Moreover, doing queered history may require engagement with unsavory characters who, like Harry Thaw, have an attenuated but identifiable relationship with a critique of compulsory heterosexuality. Even if Thaw cannot be conceived as a gay man, historians, by calling attention to the way Thaw's sexual practices disrupt, undermine, and unmask the overdetermined love-triangle narrative promoted by this trial (and others more recent), can denaturalize and desta-

bilize public representations of compulsory heterosexuality.³⁹

This historical gesture can further an anti-homophobic politics by revealing the constructed nature of heterosexuality even in the absence of lesbian/gay subjectivity. If, as Eve Sedgwick says, "queer" is a word that cannot be sanitized⁴⁰ – at least to the extent that it suggests a process of doing history, an antihomophobic mode of inquiry – then those who do queered history can locate such disruptions in the hegemony of heterosexuality only by guarding against the impulse to colonize or overinvest in our subjects, to celebrate or denigrate them without exploring their potential for reinventing and rewriting the history of sexuality. Queerness is about making the given seem strange. It is not necessarily content to be celebrated, for to be celebrated is to be identified, and to be identified is to be stabilized, to lose the nimble stance of critique.

Notes

This essay has benefitted tremendously from the thoughtful readings of Anne Herrmann, Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, Nasser Hussain, and Karen Merrill.

- 1 This last dimension of their relationship is legendary. Nesbit became known as "the girl in the red velvet swing" after testifying at Thaw's trial that, during their first meeting, White sat her in a red velvet swing hung from a high ceiling, then pushed her higher and higher until her feet pierced a paper parasol suspended above. The scene is made a metaphor for their sexual passion in the 1955 film *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*, for which Nesbit worked as a consultant.
- 2 Nesbit wrote (possibly with the help of ghost-writers) two autobiographies, *The Story of My Life* (1914) and *Prodigal Days: The Untold Story* (1934). Both should be read as highly partial accounts of Nesbit's life, written as attempts to regain the respectability she lost after testifying at Thaw's trials. I cite them not as historically accurate accounts of events, but as texts to be read for their lay characterizations of sexual practices and identities.
- 3 Nesbit, *Prodigal Days*, 279. See also articles in *New York Times* (3–16 July 1919).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 289.

- 5 In both, however, normative heterosexuality is reinforced by substitution, as Nesbit slyly suggests that she herself is the proper sexual referent in each case. The Gump boy resembles her (and she has in fact also been the object of Thaw's sadism) and is made a sexual object only because Thaw's madness has progressed to the point of inversion; Jackie, who *should* in fact be having the affair with her (given her reputation for beauty), can only be made a joke, a comical substitute for a woman who, by virtue of his identity, foils the "real" man in the scene, Nesbit's husband Clifford.
- 6 "Pansy" was a term used in the 1920s and 1930s to describe an effeminate man, "inverted" in his gender role (and thus sexuality). See George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 15.
- 7 For this important recuperative gesture, see (among many) Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1990); Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*, rev. ed. (New York: Meridian, 1992); John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Chauncey, *Gay New York*.
- 8 For a brilliant and creative example of this search for gay ancestors, see Neil Bartlett, *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988); see also Chauncey, *Gay New York*.
- 9 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), vii.
- 10 At the same time, however much one might put stable identities into question, they remain crucial in the production of knowledge about past and current configurations of sexuality. To say that identity cannot be stabilized does not mean that it does not exist or have force in the world. I am reminded of a foray into a local bookstore, one well-versed in post-structuralist theory and (recently) spatially organized accordingly. Hoping to find recent books on abortion, I searched in vain for the store's section on "women" or "gender." It had been erased, I was told; I might look under law, or sociology, or sexuality (which meant "queer" or "spectacular," not "traditional" reproductive history). "Women" having been recently exploded as a stable category of analysis (quite rightly in my view), I was left bookless.
- 11 See, for example, Frederick L. Collins, *Glamorous Sinners* (New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1932); Paul R. Baker, *Stanny: The Gilded Life of Stanford White* (New York: The Free Press, 1989).
- 12 During Thaw's first trial, the prosecution introduced an affidavit signed by Nesbit alleging the facts of this attack. *New York Times* (16 March 1907), 2:2. Although Nesbit repudiated the substance of the affidavit during the trial, her later reclamation of the incident seems believable in light of other allegations against Thaw and his use of a horsewhip in subsequent legal proceedings. In addition to the Gump incident, see, for example, *Estartus v. Thaw*, 245 N.Y.S. 781 (1930).
- 13 Nesbit, *Prodigal Days*, 110–12.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 286, 113.
- 15 See Collins, *Glamorous Sinners*, 237.
- 16 Nesbit, *Prodigal Days*, 111.
- 17 Feminism is of course quite capable of a recuperative stance itself, as lesbian/gay history is capable of a critical one in other contexts.
- 18 For an extended analysis of this problematic, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 27–35.
- 19 Randolph Trumbach, "The Birth of the Queen: Sodomy and the Emergence of Gender Equality in Modern Culture, 1660–1750," in Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden from History*, 131.
- 20 See Foucault: "Underneath the libertine, the pervert . . . on friendly terms with delinquents and akin to madmen." Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 39–40.
- 21 On this distinction see Jeffrey Weeks, "Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes: Male Prostitution and the Regulation of Homosexuality in England in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden From History*, 205.
- 22 Nesbit, *Prodigal Days*, 112, 306.
- 23 Thaw was excessive in most aspects of his life. He once, for example, gave a dinner for over 100 women (no other men were present) over which he spent \$500 a plate and \$700 on jewelry for each woman. He would throw violent tantrums in the finest restaurants, drink several bottles of champagne in a sitting, send lavish anonymous gifts to chorus girls.
- 24 Quoted in Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History*, 63.

- 25 Thaw apparently called White a “moral pervert” while trying to convince Anthony Comstock, the famous anti-smut activist, to investigate White and others. See Baker, *Stanny*, 351.
- 26 After being declared sane in 1915, for example, Thaw returned home to Pittsburgh and was met by a cheering crowd of over 1,000. *New York Times* (20 July 1915), 1:4.
- 27 Condensed from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., v. XII (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 1014–15. This most recent edition adds a new definition: “Of a person (usu. a man): homosexual.”
- 28 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 92.
- 29 Judith Butler, “Sexual Inversions,” in Domna Stanton, ed., *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 357.
- 30 Jennifer Terry, “Theorizing Deviant Historiography,” *differences* 3:2 (1991): 55–74.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 33 Anonymous Queers, “Queers Read This,” in William B. Rubenstein, ed., *Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Law* (New York: New Press, 1993), 47.
- 34 On shame as constitutive of performing a (non-essential) queer identity, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,” *GLQ* 1:1 (1993).
- 35 “Queer” as it is classically defined does not require this kind of anti-homophobic analysis; thus a “queer history” so defined could encompass non-normative heterosexual practices. Nevertheless, “queer historians” of the present moment generally are allied with a confrontational lesbian/gay politics (though some might refuse the label of “gay male” or “lesbian”); to the extent that “queer” retains those current meanings, a queer history will incorporate them into its historiographic frame.
- 36 Although one could do a history of self-named queers as historical subjects; see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, esp. chap. 4, “The Forging of Queer Identities and the Emergence of Heterosexuality in Middle-Class Culture.”
- 37 To that extent, queer history is akin to feminist history in that it is defined by the critical stance of the historian rather than the object of study.
- 38 Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ* 1:1 (1993): 19.
- 39 In this respect one might ask of the O. J. Simpson case, who was Ronald Goldman, anyway? As the couple’s third term, why has he been erased from public discourse about this double murder? Do his handsome looks, his earring, his “friendship but no more” with Nicole Brown Simpson make of him a narrative cipher in the story of heterosexuality gone wrong? Even if he were “straight,” can he be read as a queer presence in this drama, a destabilizing force in an otherwise normative sexual narrative?
- 40 Quoted in Alisa Solomon, “Identity Crisis: Queer Politics in the Age of Possibilities,” *Village Voice* (30 June 1992): 29.