

Forum

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Queering History

TO THE EDITOR:

In an essay in the section The Changing Profession—which we might rename for this occasion *Plus ça change . . .*—Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon consider the directions for queer history ten years after Goldberg's groundbreaking edited collection, *Queering the Renaissance* ("Queering History," *PMLA* 120 [2005]: 1608–17). In their reflection on the current state of queer studies with respect to past Western cultures, they construe the task of queer history in terms of both its refusal of teleological histories and its insistence on what they call "homohistory," that is, a history that "would be invested in suspending determinate sexual and chronological differences while expanding the possibilities of the nonhetero, with all its connotations of sameness, similarity, proximity, and anachronism" (1609).

We welcome the spirit of Goldberg and Menon's proposition for homohistory, and we would like to push things even further. Surely the pursuit of homohistory, in its resistance to the constraints of traditional historicist practice—particularly teleology, successionism, and the concept of the past's alterity—must finally compel scholars to dispense with periodization, the imposition of temporal boundaries that support the epistemological regimes the authors wish to break down. (Not to mention the nationalist and imperialist regimes that postcolonial scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, whom they quote, oppose.) But in this essay there is no trace of, say, the long and varied span of time studied under the rubric "medieval" that might haunt the notion of an epistemically foundational Renaissance, though the authors insist theoretically that "the past is never fully over and never fully known" and, with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "argue against absolute breaks as models for how history happens" (1610). Queer Renaissance history, in practice as well as in theory, must abandon the alteritist histories (along with their loaded terminologies) that abject the past in favor of the renascent.

In the name of a homohistory that resists the pressures of modernity, scholars are just as capable of reconstituting conventional periodizations as are scholars working with more traditional delineations of the past. It is no longer sufficient, if it ever was, to quote theorists of collapsing boundaries but cling (however inadvertently) to basic periodizations, for in so doing the investigation of the vast multiplicities of the past will be curtailed. We second Goldberg and Menon's endorsement of Lee Edelman's theoretical program in his recent book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke UP, 2004). The resistance to teleology might just begin with a resistance to the future and to that intransigent heterosexual reproductive teleology that renders the sixteenth century a rebirth and the Middle Ages a happily superseded interlude between antiquity and modernity.

But we're not merely disgruntled medievalists ever trying to get our due from Renaissance scholars. The issues are more complex than simple turf battles. In our current world of academic jobs and curricula, still resolutely organized according to traditional disciplinary boundaries and periodizations, how do we break chronological boundaries in significant and sustained ways? If, as Chakrabarty has so eloquently suggested, the time of the *now* is heterogeneous, on what new bases do we make choices and set priorities for study? What are the substantial and abiding consequences of this kind of thinking for the practice of literary history?

We suspect that the difficulty of such questions may have stalled the field, if this essay is any marker of queer history now (as its title suggests). The conceptualization of homohistory here does not move much beyond what Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero urged in 1996, in an essay Goldberg and Menon quote. Goldberg and Menon mention various recent queer Renaissance studies that are in tune with the project of homohistory, and maybe these studies substantially address the problem of periodization we point out here; in this essay there's no indication. The more general challenge now is how to proceed nonlinearly. It has become almost routine for literary scholars to critique the positivist discipline of history, but after the critique how do we, as a "collectivity" (adapting Paul Strohm's term [*Theory and the Premodern Text* (U of Minnesota P, 2000) 93]) trained in literary periods, create

and use nonlinear histories? How do we articulate them with one another? Facing such questions as these will be crucial if we are to figure out how the field can truly and queerly develop.

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Reply:

In a recent performance in Washington, the camp show duo Kiki and Herb riffed on the revolutionary gay liberation slogan "We're here, we're queer!" by fitting it to the times. The new motto now weakly claimed, "We're here, we're beige."

The pair got at something that many queer theorists refuse to comprehend—namely, that our modes of studying desire have become predictable and boring. How refreshing, then, that Carolyn Dinshaw and Karma Lochrie call on queer theory to heed Kiki and Herb's lament, to bravely resist convention, and to spurn the reification of telos. How surprising, then, that they seem to want both to challenge teleology and to claim a certain priority for medieval studies.

Dinshaw and Lochrie's main argument is not with our essay's call to arms against historicism as a mode by which to study desire but rather with a lack of acknowledgment accorded to "medieval" literature, culture, and history. What they deny is a turf war is exactly that by any other name. This war crystallizes around the essay's use of the term *Renaissance*. We used the word not to celebrate a rebirth that supersedes an intervening period between itself and antiquity but to insist on the impossibility of any historical period's ever achieving self-identity. Queering the term *Renaissance* and the period it would designate affects all terminologies of periodization, none of which can lay claim to a point of origination, all of which undergo an unending process of renewal. As the essay states at its beginning, in a sentence Dinshaw and Lochrie quote, homohistory is "invested in suspending determinate sexual and chronological differences while expanding the possibilities of the nonhetero, with all its connotations of sameness, similarity, proximity, and anachronism." That our