Is There a Room for Queer Desires in the House of Biblical Scholarship?

*A Methodological Reflection on Queer Desires in the Context of Contemporary New Testament Studies*

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Abstract

When tackling the issue of homosex, New Testament interpreters either read the biblical text as continuously relevant to our present (continuism) or as completely estranged from contemporary conceptions of desire (alteritism). This article explores the historiographical styles underlying both hermeneutical strategies to argue that, despite their many advantages, continuism and alteritism both have homophobic and/or queerphobic foundations and occlude from contemporary debates of sexuality’s multiple queer desires and practices (like “straights” having queer sex). By surveying recent developments in queer historiography, I conclude that no comprehensive account of desire is equipped to account for the present, and, thus, virtual dis/identifications with the biblical past cannot be guaranteed or foreclosed.

Keywords

Queer theory – Romans – historiography – contextual hermeneutics

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When engaging homosex, contemporary New Testament scholarship is caught up in a dilemma. Texts supposedly referring to the issue of homosex are laid upon a procrustean bed in that they are considered too distant to be relevant to contemporary debates, or too close to shed any light. The dominance of the “objectivist” approach, the uneven engagement with critical theory, and the exceptional status the Bible holds within the humanities are factors that contribute to what I would call a “moralization of non-normative configurations of desire across time and space.”

Here, I use contemporary interpretations of Romans to (1) illustrate the aforementioned situation; (2) map out historiographical debates on the continuity/discontinuity of sexual identities; and (3) argue that although compre-

1 Given the fact that most scholarship focuses on male-male desire, the counter-examples I explore are male-centered. However, I shall suggest that a queer approach to contemporary debates about sexual identity helps in problematizing “gender” both as an identitarian category and as a criterion to organize and conceptualize desire.


hensive theories of sexual identity provide valuable hermeneutical insights, stressing the indeterminacy of desire serves best to understand the grasp of the biblical on the present context. Consequently, the article starts by diagnosing the problem of “moralization of the queer” in New Testament studies and more specifically in Romans, continues by surveying the field of queer historiography, and concludes by showing how contemporary queer practices deconstruct historiographical assumptions on contemporary sexual identities in the field of biblical studies.

My contribution offers a critical reflection, not an exegetical argument, on the political and ethical consequences of using different “historiographical styles,” taking recent interpretations of Romans as a starting point. I suggest that one effect of framing the debate in terms of the continuity/discontinuity divide is that queer desires remain unexplored both in the present and in the past. At the theoretical level, I argue that the historiographical assumptions that (1) we must skip present desires to interpret the past impartially, and (2) we are able to draft unambiguous taxonomies of the erotic from which to interpret the Bible, rest on homophobic and/or queerphobic grounds. At the

5 Therefore I situate my reflection within the “ethical turn” in biblical studies. Schüssler Fiorenza conceptualizes ekklēsia “as a radical democratic emancipatory space of possibility and vision” (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], p. 119). From this perspective, my argument is that queer practices have not yet found a voice in the democratic agora, or, to rephrase the title of the article, there is no room for the queer in the ekklēsia. The ethical commitment to bring to the fore queer practices is also ideological in nature because it exposes the ways in which debates around homosex in the Bible occlude non-identitarian, non-normative sexual practices in the present. In this particular case, the ideological injunction to emphasize the reality of the flesh-and-blood reader (and her queer practices) proves extremely fruitful to deconstruct the current re-construction of the biblical past (see Fernando Segovia, “Cultural Criticism: Expanding the Scope of Biblical Criticism,” in Roland Boer and Fernando Segovia [eds], The Future of the Biblical Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on Global Key [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012], pp. 307–36).

6 Fradenburg and Freccero warn against the dangers of objectivism and develop a “queer scrutiny” of historiographical styles that shun contemporary desires in order to read the past. In their view, such historical knowledge is founded on the renunciation of the self and hides its narcissism (Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, “Introduction: Caxton, Foucault, and the Pleasures of History,” in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (eds.), Premodern Sexualities [New York: Routledge, 1996], p. viii).

7 In New Testament studies “queer” tends to be equated with “homosexual” or “gay.” However, I submit, queer desires should be interpreted as those desires that refuse to be understood in identitarian terms. In this reading, queer desires skip any alignment along the homo/hetero continuum, transcend identitarian categories of sexuality, and are best located, as I shall show,
hermeneutical level, I contend that any reappropriation of Romans 1 calls for a thorough contextualization of present sexualities. I conclude that although there are many rooms in the house of biblical scholarship, the queer bedroom is not yet queer enough because “queer” continues to be equated with “homosexual,” conceived of as a fixed sexual identity.

Contemporary Biblical Scholarship on Queer Desires

In this section, using as an entry point recent commentaries on Romans 1, I classify positions on queer desires along a continuum with two opposite poles: on one hand, interpretations that seek to establish a direct identification across time and space between same-sex relationships (“they are just like us” or the “continuous” approach) and, on the other, authors who consider that no parallels are to be drawn between erosics in the past and sexuality in the present (“they are alien to us” or the “discontinuous” perspective). Proponents of both hermeneutical strategies are aware of queer theory, particularly as blazoned by Michel Foucault, although they deploy it to differing political and ethical ends. Whereas in the first case, the distinction between “acts” and “identities” is used to condemn any homosexual act, in the “discontinuity” approach the use of theory renders the text irrelevant to contemporary debates.

In the following, I contend that positions linking past and present desires are homophobic because they use modern conceptions of “sexuality” to ascribe meaning across time and space, but I also argue that “discontinuism” poses the danger of being queerphobic by foreclosing the multiple meanings that desires acquire in the present. In light of these limitations, I propose to open up a theoretical space that promotes virtually unlimited ways for queers to dis/identify with the biblical past.

outside solidified taxonomies. Consequently, by “homophobic” I refer to those discursive practices that do not allow for a proper expression and theorization of non-straight desires. Since I argue that some interpretations in New Testament studies are “gay-friendly” but stigmatize or occlude queer practices in the present, I have introduced the notion of “queerphobia” to refer to those discursive practices that represent non-straight desires and practices while excluding any possibility of desires that are not configured along the straight/homo divide. To put it differently, homophobia operates by excluding “gay identity,” queerphobia by excluding any possibility outside of identity.

8 I use “continuism” to describe approaches that establish a straightforward link between past and present desire, and “discontinuism” or “alteritism” to describe the opposite strategy.
The “Like us” Approach

Theologies and interpretations that establish continuity in terms of sexual identities usually, although not always, pursue a moralization of past and contemporary contexts that is explicitly homophobic. On the right-wing end, many commentaries plainly link homosex, judgment, and AIDS. Perhaps the most prominent biblical scholar in this area is Robert Gagnon, who espouses a view of gender complementarity in which each sex is created with a specific sexual role geared towards procreation. The Genesis account grounds this divinely ordained anthropology that Paul takes up in his writings. According to Gagnon, Paul not only is consistent with the Old Testament view on sexuality but goes a step further by demonstrating that even pagans had access to this knowledge as inscribed in nature. Homosexual relationships violate the natural order of things and brings about all kinds of negative mental, physical, and spiritual consequences, according to Gagnon.

Gagnon’s theoretical assumption can be seen (explicitly or not) in a vast number of commentaries on Romans. Bicksler, for instance, considers that lust is an excess of desire that results in godly punitive actions delivered as all kinds of venereal diseases. An identification of past and present homosexuality results in a continuity of both identities and punishments. It would be incorrect to view such a blatant moralization of past and present contexts as exclusively endemic of radical evangelicalism. On the contrary, similar arguments – if more tempered – are continuously suggested in mainstream scholarship. Douglas Moo, for instance, acknowledges that linking AIDS with God’s judgment is unsound, but he goes on to argue that it is the consequence of a world turning away from God. AIDS is here directly connected to sex between men and then read as a symptom of a world that does not follow godly rules. Moo,

among many other authors, condemns not “sexual identities” per se but the indulgence in actual sex.13

Similarly Ben Witherington and Darlene Hyatt consider that Romans 1 offers the clearest condemnation of “homosexual and lesbian behavior” in the sense that the apostle speaks of “actions,” not “inclinations, attitudes, or genetics.”14 These scholars are aware of the distinction between “acts” and “identities,” an insight that harkens back to the origins of queer theory, but they are redeploying it in moralizing fashion when they assume that “acts” have a transcultural meaning regardless of social systems of representation and posit “acts” and “identities” under the realm of “sexuality,” a move that the same distinction tried to counter.15 As we have seen, “continuism” stigmatizes “acts” and “identities” and forecloses any potential discussion of the distinction itself.16


14 Witherington and Hyatt argue that “vv. 26–27 are about as clear a condemnation of homosexual and lesbian behavior as exists in the NT. Paul speaks of actions, not inclinations, attitudes, or genetics … In Paul’s view homosexual behavior flows naturally from idolatry in that it is a rejection of the creation order that the Creator God set up in the first place … At a minimum, if one believes that there is no God or will be no ultimate or final consequences to misbehavior, one is more likely to misbehave. Paul here is talking about something even more dramatic than that. He is referring to persons in rebellion against God who deliberately reject what they know about God and turn instead to sinful ways” (Ben Witherington and Darlene Hyatt, Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary [Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004], pp. 69–71). See also a similar argument in Frank J. Matera, Romans (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), pp. 54–56.

15 Luke Timothy Johnson seems unable to escape the temptation of thinking Paul outside of “sexuality.” Notice here the framing of the debate: “Is homosexuality then, as it seems to Paul, entirely a matter of porneia (sexual sin incompatible with the rule of God, 1 Cor. 6:9–11), or is it compatible with a chaste and covenantal relationship?” (Luke Timothy Johnson, Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary [Reading the New Testament Series; Macon: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2001], p. 36). See also Brendan Byrne, Romans (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 69–72.

16 For Sproul homosexual practices are sins against God and nature. He concludes that all current debates about sexuality can be answered from the biblical text (R.C. Sproul, Romans [St. Andrew’s Expositional Commentary; Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009], p. 51). This position has best been theorized in Robert Gagnon’s Bible and Homosexual Practice. The conception of the Bible as authoritative and the use of theological arguments strengthen the link between continuism and homophobic readings. Outside biblical studies, the case of Amy Richlin in Classics shows that continuism does not necessarily entail heterosexism (Amy Richlin, Marcus Aurelius in Love [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006], pp. 1–31).
Not every author moralizes in order to condemn. Sometimes the distinction between “acts” and “identities” results in a condemnation of the first and a compassionate attitude towards the second; in some other instances, continuism is framed within broader theological considerations of tolerance or acceptance. All these approaches share their vision of “sexuality” as a cross-cultural phenomenon and persist in the moralization of texts and contexts by establishing a “gay textual canon,” by not applying the same criteria to “heterosexual” texts, or by making use of the “continuity” argument even as they depart from it in terms of moral evaluation. Consequently, in the house of

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17 Some authors even ascribe the moralization to queer theory itself: “Queer theorists encounter in Romans 1:24–27 perhaps the most explicit articulation and condemnation of homosexual activity in all of Scripture” (Douglas Atchison Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* [Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2009], p. 206).


20 For instance, see Martin Stowasser, “Homosexualität und Bibel: Exegetische und Hermeneutische Überlegungen zu Einem Schwierigen Thema,” *New Testament Studies* 43:4 (1997), pp. 503–26. Jewett’s commentary is paradigmatic; his uncritical use of “homoerotic” and “heterosexual” terminology leads him to argue that Paul restricted all “sexual relations to married heterosexual partners” (Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* [Hermeneia. A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006], p. 181). For Jewett, Paul’s position is rooted in a Jewish tradition that leads him to oppose exploitative Roman practices: “Paul’s language served to remove any vestige of decency, honor, or friendship from same-sex relations. Neither distinguishing pederasty from relationships between adult, consenting males, nor distinguishing between active and passive partners as Roman culture was inclined to do, Paul simply follows the
biblical scholarship this strand of continuism occupies the room of queer-phobia.

Bernadette Brooten’s *Love Between Women* represents a paradigmatic instance where continuism does not result in heterosexism.\(^{21}\) Her seminal work could, in fact, be interpreted as continuism’s antidote to homophobia in that she, on the one hand, defends a “like us” approach to sexual identities\(^{22}\) but, on the other, deploys – from a contemporary perspective – an ethical framework that divests Paul’s original indictment of its grasp on the present. Paul’s position is, in her view, concordant with the Roman gender and sexual ideology that regards female homoerotism as contrary to “natural” gender roles where the male is the penetrator and the female is the *penetree*. Whereas Brooten defends a historiographical continuism on the grounds of a supposedly transhistorical male dominance,\(^ {23}\) she needs to pose discontinuism in terms of the ethical. This is best appreciated when, at the end of her study, Brooten shows that lesbian condemnation is pervasively linked to gender stratification and that if we, “church people” and “policy makers,” continue to prioritize heterosexuality we will be supporting a long-held homophobic and misogynistic tradition.\(^ {24}\) In short, an alleged cross-cultural lesbian “identity”\(^ {25}\) calls for a contemporary ethics of equality that affirms the lives of contemporary gays,

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21 Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Boswell is a case in point here since, on one hand, he sees a continuum in terms of sexualities between the present and the past and, on the other hand, considers that Romans 1 refers to “heterosexual men” performing “homosexual acts” (John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], p. 110). As will become clear in the course of my argument, this is precisely the problem in the continuist/discontinuist debate as it approves of gay sex even as it stigmatizes “queer sex.”


23 Brooten argues that no historian has offered evidence of tolerance for love between women in the way that they have for male love. Because male dominance is pervasive, lesbian love is pervasively condemned (ibid., p. 24). In accordance with her continuist position she concludes that, regardless of the meaningful silences in the sources, the dismissal of a lesbian identity in antiquity is mistaken (ibid., p. 26).

24 Ibid., pp. 561–62.

25 Here I agree with Halperin’s sharp critiques of Brooten for her use of transhistorical categories. I take issue, however, with how Halperin conceptualizes contemporary queer sexualities. See Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 55–60. For a recent comparison of both authors’ use of historiog-
Is There a Room for Queer Desires?

lesbians, and all women. Such a hermeneutical position, I shall argue, ends up freezing the present and playing into the hand of hegemonic contemporary identities. To continue with the metaphor, in the house of biblical scholarship ethical discontinuism occupies a gay-friendly room.

The “Not like us” Approach

Whereas Robert Gagnon spearheads continuism in New Testament studies, Dale Martin advocates for discontinuism. By adhering to an “ethics of discontinuity,” Martin proposes an exegesis that queers the past by establishing a distance between desires “according to us” and desires “according to them.” Martin offers two reasons to advocate for a gap between the Pauline and the contemporary context: (1) Paul situates homosex in the realm of idolatry, not sexuality, and, (2) Paul is not talking about “disoriented desires” but “of legitimate desires that were allowed illegitimate freedoms.”


Martin, “Heterosexism and the interpretation of Romans 1:18–32,” p. 137. This later point has been argued by Fredrickson who, focussing on the uses of “natural” and “unnatural”
Menéndez-Antuña has recently substantiated Martin’s first point by surveying the historical importance of the Goddess, especially in Corinth where the letter was written, and by situating “queer practices” in the realm of religion, not sexuality. Offering a valuable study of sexual characters in the Mater religions such as transvestite priests (galli), temple prostitutes, and eunuchs, Townsley convincingly argues that Paul refers to male-female sex, not to lesbians thus “problematizing the idea that in vv. 26–27, Paul describing the ‘category of homosexuality.’”

The strength of Martin’s proposal, both in terms of biblical interpretation and its effects on current debates, lies in his emphasis on discontinuity between the past and the present: “for us” homosexual desire is of a specific kind, distinct from “heterosexual desire” in a way that foregrounds mutually exclusive identities. While for Paul, according to Martin, desire cannot be classified across a qualitative axis (“the less desire, the better”), for us desire makes no sense if understood exclusively in quantitative terms (after all, homosexual and heterosexual desire are of a different kind altogether). This discrepancy in conceptualizing the nature of desire leads Martin to suggest that any attempt to map current practices onto the biblical context leads to contradictions, misrepresentations, incoherence, or to pernicious political and ethical ends. For instance, in analyzing Romans 1 Martin suggests – rightly, I think – that for Paul “homosexuality” is linked to an understanding of the history of salvation that considers that humanity was monotheistic in its origins and that “homosexuality” is a punishment for idolatry and polytheism.

passions, interprets Paul’s position as concerned with self-control and concludes that “unnatural use, from this perspective, has less to do with the gender of the persons having sex and more with the loss of self-control experienced by the user of another’s body” (David Fredrickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27,” in David Balch [ed.], Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], pp. 197–241 [207]). Notice here, once again, how a supposedly gay-friendly argument has anti-queer consequences.

30 Ibid., p. 728. Townsley’s contribution is a paradigmatic example of the lack of engagement with critical theory in biblical studies. Although the concept of “queer” is central to his arguments, Townsley does not even acknowledge the main contributions in queer studies. When he concludes that we cannot infer the general content of Paul’s beliefs about sexual orientations in order to condemn “queer relationships,” his conflation of “queer” and “homosexual” forecloses virtual identifications between queers in the present and queers in the past.
32 As Martin puts it: “If we were to follow Paul’s logic, we would have to assume that once
Stephen Moore agrees with Dale Martin’s arguments, but he seeks “more drastic defamiliarizations ... for the larger theological treatise.” Instead of applying broader theological concerns to understand Rom. 1:18–32, Moore extrapolates the gender and sexual ideology contained in the pericope to the letter as whole. The Pauline God, in Moore’s hands, turns out to be the penetrating male that demands a submissive effeminate Jesus (and an even more submissive Paul), who, in turn, is only able to achieve masculinity through the exercise of self-mastery. Whereas Martin sees in Rom. 1:26–27 a sociosexual system completely alien to contemporary configurations of gender equality, Moore reads such ideology as the tip of a theological iceberg where “Jesus in his relationship to God perfectly models the submissiveness that should also characterize the God-fearing female’s proper relationship to the male. This is the sexual substratum of Paul’s soteriology.”

Martin is able to stress the irrelevance of the Pauline cosmovision only by picturing a “present” where such intellectual positions have been superseded (in the case of idolatry) or by assuming that contemporary subjects configure their desires only in terms of the hetero/homo divide. Moore, in a call for discontinuity-defamiliarization, goes much further and converts Martin’s “sexual discontinuism” into theological alteritism, for such a hypermasculine, prapic theological “phallofixed” system would only perpetuate a non-livable present. One could argue, then, that a radical discontinuism forecloses “the queer room” by emptying it of virtual contemporary dwellers.

idolatry and polytheism were forsaken, homosexuality would cease to exist, which is probably what Paul believed; after all, he never hints that any Jew or Christian engages in homosexuality” (ibid., p. 55). Similarly Byrne, Romans, p. 69.

Stephen D. Moore, God’s Beauty Parlor, pp. 133–72. Not surprisingly both authors use Foucault as a fundamental source. Moore’s arguments, as I will show, run very close to Halperin’s. Both authors even use identical classical texts to make identical historiographical claims. (Compare Moore, pp. 138–40 to Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, pp. 38–41.) Moore also takes Stowers’ insights about the gender system contained in Romans (Stanley K. Stowers, A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994], pp. 94–95).

Moore, God’s Beauty Parlor, p. 134.

Ibid., p. 156.

The assumption that the present is configured around the hetero/homo divide is what allows most discontinuist authors to advocate a gay-friendly Paul. This is partly due to a Halperinian reading of Foucault in most exegetical and theological discontinuist interpretations. From a theological perspective, see Gerard Loughlin, “Pauline Conversations: Rereading Romans 1 in Christ,” Theology & Sexuality 11 (2004), pp. 72–102.

One could argue, however, that Moore’s portrayal of God in Romans resembles S&M practices and thus calls for a contextualization of a queer re-appropriation in the present.
On one hand, “continuism” assumes that acts have a core meaning regardless of the social conditions in which they occur. It is the “sexual character” of the act that grants continuity between Paul’s injunction and the contemporary context. On the other, “discontinuism” skips moralizing the text and context by constructing an “artificial present.” To put it differently, if continuism freezes both present and past and terms them as equal, alteritism poses them as radically different. Subsequently, more attention needs to be paid to the ideological, political, and ethical implications of using a monolithic “we” as the measuring rod to evaluate potential dis/identifications with the past. While Martin advocates a politics of total detachment from the ancient worldview, and Gagnon suggests a full-blown identification with the text’s ideology, I suggest that we explore further the theoretical underpinnings that link “our present” to the “biblical past,” that is, explore who is the “we” that sees in the biblical text a il/legitimate antecessor, a “[un/]desirable mirror that dictates who we are to look like and behave today.” Moore, right at the end of his important contribution, advances the necessity to situate the queerest “we” at the center of the theological reformation. In the following, I sketch a theoretical framework that would open up room for such queer desires.

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38 Such an approach mines critical theory in order to misrepresent it and, ultimately, to dismiss its political effects. Foucault never argued that there were no sexual identities or inclinations in the past but rather that we need to look at the shifting possible relationships between sex and identity both in the present and in the past (David M. Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality,” Representations 63 [1998], pp. 93–120).

39 Marchal destabilizes the dichotomy continuism/alteritism (“historicist differences or a transhistoric similarity,” in his terms) by underscoring the instability/discontinuity of identities in the past, which enables a “touch across time” (p. 392). Regarding Romans 1, Marchal stresses the incoherences by showing how different divine knowledges coexist, how contradictions serve to reinforce contemporary stigmatizations, how the image of the divine is polyvalent, and by reminding us the diversity of the assembly (Romans 16). Whereas Marchal’s destabilizing strategy focuses on the past, in my contribution I seek to problematize identities in the present as they are read when analyzing the past. My argument also expands such a project in two ways: On the one hand, I show how the undecidability of desire bans any attempt to establish which “touches,” to use Marchal’s vocabulary, are possible in advance, and, on the other, more importantly, I sketch a theoretical framework that allows for a thorough contextualization of flesh-and-blood contemporary sexual (and non-sexual) non/identities.


41 Moore, God’s Beauty Parlor, p. 172.
Ethos of Virtual Identifications: Styles of Queer Historiographies

Foucault theorized a transition, in the middle of the nineteenth century, from the aberration of the sodomite to the categorization of the homosexual as a species. Foucault’s conceptualization of the emergence of this new specimen in medical and psychological discourse rested on an innovative theory of power (bio-power) whose ramifications have extended far beyond any discourse on sex, sexuality, or gender. The now classical distinction between “acts” and “identities” – also used by continuist biblical interpreters – derives from the Foucauldian argument made in the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* that before the nineteenth century, homosexual activity designated a set of forbidden *acts* performed by males and did not refer to certain types of individuals. In the second volume, Foucault demonstrated that Classical Greece knew no sexual identity per se. Sexual mores did not define a core self and were mostly related to the status of the self and the *polis*. If *The History of Sexuality*, one could convincingly argue, inaugurated the field of queer studies,

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42 For an analysis of the methodological consequences of taking the capillary nature of power seriously, see Barry Smart, *Michel Foucault* (Key Sociologists; New York: E. Tavistock Publications, 1985), p. 79. The importance of Foucault’s conception of power for queer politics and activism can hardly be overstated. The “queer movement” mined this definition of power in order to fight a homophobia that was reconceptualized not as a hatred coming (only) from the state or the law, but as a discourse that saturated the entire field of cultural and social representation, a set of not necessarily rational forces that pervaded processes of socialization, subjectivation, and objectification. See David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).


the affirmation that “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” inaugurate the subfield of queer historicography that, in turn, took to heart the project of historicizing sexual discourses. Historicism’s call to “always historicize” has been the leitmotiv that has driven most projects by queer historians, even if they came to the table with varied methodological and theoretical commitments.

Closely following Foucault’s work, David Halperin has probably been the most convincing defender of a kind of historicism devoted to clarifying methodologically the relationships between periodization and “homosexuality.” Focusing on the study of Classical Greece, Halperin problematizes universal claims about the virtual identifications between ancient and current sexual regimes. His historicography emphasizes the specificities of both systems in order to ban a trans-epochal view of sexuality. More specifically, he shows that, on the one hand, there was nothing “wrong” with the Ancient Greeks and, on the other, that “our system” has blinded our perceptions when it comes to approaching other “worlds” to the extent that we can hardly think beyond the assumed universality of our sexuality categories. This “discontinuous strategy” signals the multiple and potentially infinite ways in which sexual desire has been configured throughout history. More importantly, differentialism proves that “sexuality” is a modern invention, as it seeks to disidentify Greco-Roman

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46 Queer historicography is a complex disciplinary field informed by a wide range of theoretical and methodological trajectories (phenomenology, psychoanalysis, feminism of varied sorts, deconstructionism, etc.) The historical trajectory that I trace in this section takes the issue of (dis)identification with the past as its organizing criterion. I should note that there is an ongoing and heated debate about the task, scope, and strategies proper to queer historicography. For a view that departs from the one presented in this article, see Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies,” *PMLA* 128 (2013), pp. 21–39.
47 The influence of Halperin in Pauline studies is important. He is one of Brooten’s main interlocutors, an important reference to Dale Martin, and a prominent partner in “Sex and the Single Apostle” (Stephen Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor*, pp. 133–72) and in Joseph Marchal’s contribution (“Making History’ Queerly: Touches across Time through a Bibliical Behind,” pp. 376–81). Furthermore, he provides a methodological backdrop for Townsley (“Paul, The Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23–28,” p. 1) who, in turn, uses Craig Williams.
48 Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, p. 3.
49 Ibid.
50 Halperin sets out to “denaturalize the sexual body by historicizing it, by illuminating its multiple determinations in historical culture, and thereby to contest the body’s use as a site for the production of heterosexual meanings and for their transformation into timeless and universal realities” (ibid., p. 84).
sexual-object choice from the contemporary sexual-orientation framework, so the later does not colonize the earlier but becomes destabilized by it. The past becomes an estranged instance that has a queering effect on our universalizing assumptions of what sexuality is in general, and what homosexuality is in particular.

In the 1990s, Eve Kosofsky Segdwick expressed her awe at the fact that, of all the dimensions among which genital activity can be organized, the gender of the object choice became the dominant criterion at the turn of the twentieth century. Sedgwick faults both Foucault and Halperin for trying to make a clear-cut distinction between the modern concept of “homosexuality” and the pre-modern notion of “sodomy.” Such a supersessionist model in which discourses follow each other chronologically fails to account for the “definitional incoherence at the core of the modern notion of homosexuality.” In axiom 1 of *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick suggests instead that we revert to “nonce taxonomies” or “the making and unmaking and remaking and redisolution of hundreds of old and new categorical meanings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world” and suggests that “there is a large family of things we know and need to know about ourselves and each other with which we have ... so far created for ourselves almost no theoretical room to deal.” In effect, Sedgwick is concerned with the ways in which doing queer

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51 Halperin considers that for “us,” inheritors of the Kinsey scale, it is impossible to think of sexual preference outside sexual orientation, of sexual choices without falling back on to “sexuality” (ibid., p. 91). As will become clear in the next section, I problematize assumptions about the “us.”

52 Halperin seeks a reading of the *Erôtes* that plays off its cultural specificity – by carefully setting aside potential colonizations of “our” system – and its relevance for contemporary queer politics (ibid.). Although Halperin achieves the first goal, the second one remains to be fully developed.

53 The ultimate effect “will be to defamiliarize current sexual behaviors and attitudes and to destabilize the binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality that so decisively structures contemporary discourses of homophobia” (ibid., p. 92). The problem, I contend, is that by choosing to read the past from the dominant homo/hetero divide, Halperin performatively reaffirms it.


57 Ibid., p. 24.
theory following a taxonomic model papers over marginal sexualities for which no discursive place is to be found.\textsuperscript{58}

Although Sedgwick only marginally concerned herself with historiography, her methodological insights have proven highly influential in queer theory because they offer a framework to study how sexualities have flourished at the margins of dominant discourses. Her theoretical intervention problematizes “our normative present” as the lens through which we explore contemporary and past desires.\textsuperscript{59} To put it differently, queer historiography has grown to scrutinize the complicated ways in which past and present touch upon each other. From a “present-to-past” perspective, such developments are interested in queering the ways interpreters dis/avow or dis/identify with the past. From a “past-to-present” angle, theorists are concerned about how a reconstructed past provides the fulcrum from which modernity construes its identity. Both moves, I submit, are crucial in order to examine the “spots” that remain undertheorized in the back-and-forth between the present and the past. More specifically, regarding biblical and theological interpretation, queer historiography

\textsuperscript{58} Given the relevance of Sedgwick’s contribution to my argument I quote her here at length. She notices the following differences: “To some, the focus of “the sexual” seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others, it enfolds them loosely or floats virtually free of them. Even identical genital acts mean different things to different people. Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some, a small share of others. Some spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little. Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none. Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don’t do, or even don’t want to do. For some people, it is important that sex be embedded in contexts resonant with meaning, narrative, and connectedness with other aspects of their life; for other people, it is important that they not be; to others, it doesn’t occur that they might be. For some people, particular sexual preferences are so fixed in memory and durable that they can only be seen as innate; for others, they appear to arise later or feel discretionary. For some people, the possibility of bad sex is aversive enough that their lives are strongly marked by its avoidance; for others, it isn’t. For some people, their sexuality provides a needed space of heightened discovery and cognitive hyperstimulation. For others, sexuality provides a needed space for routinized habituation and cognitive hiatus. Some people like spontaneous sexual scenes, others like highly scripted ones, others like spontaneous-sounding ones that are nonetheless totally predictable. Some people’s sexuality is intensely marked by autoerotic pleasures and histories. For others, this possibility seems secondary or fragile, if it exists at all. Some people, regardless of orientation, experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender and all that entails. Others do not. These differentiations can occur not just between people, but within the same person during different periods.” (Ibid., pp. 25–26).

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 45.
illuminates what remains obscured in contemporary debates about the “homosexual” in the present and in the past.

Taking her cue from Sedgwick’s axiomatic, Madhavi Menon has recently proposed “unhistoricism” as what I would call a “historiographical style” to address the relationships between historical periodization and desire. Menon convincingly criticizes both Foucault and Halperin for deploying a conception of history in which the diverse historical periods determine erotic experiences. By ascribing varying sexual regimes to different ages, she contends, these theorists organize desire in coherent systems that foreclose any variation of the sexual across time and space. Such versions of historicism are homophobic because they paper over difference. Instead of heterohistory, she proposes homohistory as the alternative where desire is conceived as always exceeding any attempt to be categorized in terms of identity. Thus, unhistoricism problematizes the ways in which history takes the present as a clear-cut map from which to read the past and takes issue with the historicist assumption that desires are legible across time and space. Alternatively, homohistory explores the unpredictable ways in which desires always skip identity configurations and dismisses taxonomies attempting to map sexual identifications. As Menon puts it, “one can never know much about sexuality at all. Instead, desires exceed sexuality’s capacity for capture; they flow, not only over the centuries, but also from label to label, complicating what we straightforwardly think of as hetero- and homosexuality.”

Menon reads Foucault’s and Halperin’s differentialism as providing fodder for a heterohistory in that the preference for “difference” relegates “sameness” to the background. In her view, queer historiography has occluded marginal desires. “Differentialism” claims to know how historical differences are con-

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60 More properly speaking, this version of historicism is queerphobic.
62 Ibid., p. 3.
63 Ibid., p. 5. In the same way, Bersani argues that “the mobility of desires defeats the project of fixing identity by way of a science of desires” (Leo Bersani, *Homo* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995], p. 107).
64 Menon, *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film*, p. 5.
65 By “preferential,” I refer here to Foucault’s and Halperin’s argument that desire cannot be linked to the sexual in the past (as a mode of subjectivity from which identity is attained).
66 I disagree with Menon on this point as one can underscore sameness and still produce homophobic homohistory. In the same vein, the author seems to conflate a history of
figured and assumes that the present can be defined against a past that always remains “other.” Menon convincingly argues that desire always keeps itself from being knowable and that our present remains as obscure as the past, but “we moderns” often imagine inhabiting the present on the basis of our perceived incommensurability with the past.\(^{67}\) In sum, “nonce taxonomies” are incorporated into historiography by way of problematizing any cross-historical and cultural determination of desire. This “undecidability of desire” compromises both continuist and discontinuist accounts that stress respectively the familiarity and the strangeness of the past and sabotages any attempt to define the present in unambiguous terms. In sum, Menon exposes how the premodern\(^{68}\) is the starting point that allows for a linear conception of history where sexual regimes are allocated following a curve of increased purity,\(^{69}\) where chronology determines teleology and teleology governs desire.\(^{70}\)

This strand of (un)historicism shows that continuism and alteritism share an important assumption on contemporary sexual identities: both flaunt having a pristine notion of what gay identity is in the present. Robert Gagnon and Dale Martin hold dramatically opposite views on biblical hermeneutics, on the ultimate textual meaning of Rom. 1:24–27, on its applicability in the present, and on the moral evaluation of contemporary male-male sex. For all of their methodological, exegetical, and ethical differences, most ironically, they both agree that contemporary gay identity is exclusively based on sexual object discourses and a history of practices when she blames differentialism for not paying attention to the unpredictable ways in which desire shows up and cannot be thematized.

\(^{67}\) Or as Fradenburg and Freccero put it: “we are modern insofar as we know that we are incommensurably different form our past and from other cultures. A culture that can think its radical difference, eschewing providential, universalist, or evolutionary narratives of human time – this is modernity” (Fradenburg and Freccero, “Introduction,” p. xv). Later they formulate the following challenging question: “Is it not the case that alteritism at times functions precisely to stabilize the identity of ‘the modern’?” (p. xix).

\(^{68}\) Although Menon focuses on Shakespeare’s period, her insights are applicable to the biblical past.

\(^{69}\) Menon, *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film*, p. 18.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., p. 19. Such critique does not apply exclusively to studies of desire across time but also across space. Much of contemporary queer anthropology on diaspora and alien sexualities relies on the category of the “different” in order to pursue aboriginal concepts detached from “our time and space.” These strategies not only can be accused of orientalism but work to consistently keep “our” time and space as “normal” and unexamined. For an illustration of such “otherization,” see the otherwise excellent study by Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
choice. In the following, I will problematize this claim that we have access to a pristine definition of desire in the present that can be compared to an assumed notion of desire in the biblical past.

Representing the Present

In studying classical notions of sexuality David Halperin, very much like Dale Martin and Robert Gagnon when analyzing the biblical text, posits a clear defined present. The present, defined by men of equal status taking turns fucking each other, offers the necessary fulcrum to outline the differences between our contemporary middle-class male taste and ancient configurations of sexual desire. For the Greeks, male-male sex was exclusively acceptable in terms of status inequality; for contemporary gay men sameness defines desire in metropolitan middle-class sexual encounters. In sum, homosexuality is defined by gender, pederasty by status. Halperin compares two different “social structurations of erotic life” in terms of a “history of discourses,” but then slips into a description of current practices in a way that makes the present normative.

It is certainly the case that contemporary gay identity is based on the person with whom one is having sex. Opting to read the past exclusively from this (mainstream) perspective, however, obviates many queer practices that cannot be described in identitarian terms. For instance, many “straight” men do not care much about the gender of the person they are having sex with as long as certain protocols are observed, some of them not so alien to those of pederasty. Here “gender” is only one variable among the many governing desire,

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71 Comparing the present and the past, Halperin focuses on the anonymous work titled Erôtes to argue that in the Greek literature desire is grounded in status inequality. Any sexual appeal between two adult men is unconceivable. The text, he argues, goes out of its way to clarify who would count as the erômenos and erastès in the relationship: signs of facial or body hair, muscle development, for example, are the features to be accounted for in order to make clear that sex among males can take place only in terms of status inequality (Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, p. 94).

72 Halperin insists that one of the differences that grants discontinuity is “the text’s emphasis on pederasty to the exclusion of homosexuality (whose existence, apparently, is not even recognized)” (ibid., p. 99).

73 See, for instance, the evidence showing that non-gay identified males who have sex with other males tend to play the insertive role as a way to protect their masculinity (Karolynn Siegel, Eric W. Schrimshaw, Helen-Maria Lekas and Jeffrey T. Parsons, “Sexual Behaviors of Non-Gay Identified Non-disclosing Men Who Have Sex with Men and Women,” Archives of Sexual Behavior 37 [2008], pp. 732–34).
and in some cases not the most important one. Many “white married men” find it sexually arousing to have sex with twinks; what is important here is not so much whether it is a boy or a girl but the smoothness, the frame, the lack of manly traits. Age/status differences set the standards of a good turn on. “White married men” do not self-identify as “homosexual” and, in fact, some of them experience their “bisexuality” as an enhancement of their (non-socially sanctioned) masculinity that needs to remain on the “down low,” which proves the point that desire skips any attempt to be categorized under the homo/hetero divide.

The kind of historicism that “attempts to acknowledge the alterity of the past as well as the irreducible cultural and historical specificities of the present” freezes the present and takes the oppressive discourse that it seeks to unsettle at face value. Picturing a past as continuously discontinuous with the present is only plausible if interpreters stick to the binary system “hetero/homo” and conceive it as a comprehensive account of every possible contemporary desire. With its emphasis on presenting a radical gap between present and past

74 Considering “gender” as the only variable that determines the object of desire occludes the reality of “trans-desires,” that is, desires that are triggered by and geared towards individuals who do not identify as male/female.

75 Studies on the “down low” are lacking from a queer perspective. I have not found any scholarly study on the sexual taxonomies taking into account “craigslist” sexuality. Some non-scholarly documented examples can be found in Keith Boykin, Beyond the Down Low: Sex and Denial in Black America (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), pp. 8–11. Boykin contests media definitions of the “down low” to show the conflicting ways in which “down low,” on the one hand, and gay and homosexuality, on the other, do not overlap. The emphasis on understanding all sexual identities along the lines of the hetero/homo divide leads many studies to tackle the issue of the “down low” as self-denial or misperception of the sexual self: “individuals who are on the down low avoid incorporating aspects of their sexual interest and behavior into an awareness of themselves. Such people therefore do not engage in behavior on a complete understanding of themselves” (Craig A. Hill, Human Sexuality: Personality and Social Psychological Perspectives [Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008], p. 208).

76 Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, p. 17.

77 Paradoxically enough, despite Brooten’s and Halperin’s crucial disagreements, both, as paradigmatic representatives of continuism and alteritism, presuppose “thick” contemporary sexual identities. Without such identitarian claims, Brooten would need to abandon the ethics of tolerance for contemporary lesbians that informs her project, whereas Halperin would not be able to make his case for a conditioned tolerance towards past configurations of the sexual.

78 For Halperin, Westerners are unable to think of sexual object-choice beyond a sexual identity that derives, in turn, from fixed sexual orientations (Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, p. 98).
identities, discontinuism essentializes the present in terms of the discourse it seeks to counter. Present sexual practices, behaviors, and identities can be better understood, I submit, if we read them according to “nonce taxonomies” rather than as comprehensive models of desire.

Reading the past and the present in supersessionist terms hinders the examination of contemporary queer practices by targeting exclusively “homosexuals.” It is certainly ironic that most recent work advocating the inclusion of “gays and lesbians” in religious communities and civil society has had the effect of occluding the multiple ways in which “straights” are having queer sex.

Our present witnesses many “straights” having sex with other males for a variety of reasons, not all of which are “sexual” in nature.79 By framing their encounters in various ways, these men are able to identify as “heterosexual” while having “homosexual sex”: those encounters are not “every day,” they are “accidental” or “recreational” (like playing a sport), a way to escape a dull existence. Depersonalizing the sexual encounter by way of withholding emotional expressions allows these men to reaffirm their masculinity and, consequently within the dominant gender/sex system, their heterosexuality.80 Empirical studies suggest that factual sexual practices have a conflicting relationship with normative sexual discourses. On the one hand, straight men are able to circumvent the “homo-hetero divide” that assigns exclusive sexual identities to individuals by detaching their experiences from the realm of the “sexual.”81 On the other, these practices demonstrate how inescapable the moralizing effects of dominant sexual regimes are. Although “sexual orientation” is the factor that governs identity (after all, the emphasis is on being “straight”), there is a

80 Reback and Larkins conclude that here heterosexual identity remains uncompromised by compartmentalizing the sexual encounters and keeping them outside the realm of intimacy (ibid., p. 771).
81 In contrast to Halperin for whom “homosexuality is now set over against heterosexuality. Homosexual object-choice, in and of itself, is seen as marking a difference from heterosexual object-choice. Homo- and heterosexuality have become more or less mutually exclusive forms of human subjectivity, different kinds of human sexuality, and any feeling of expression of heterosexual desire is thought to rule out any feeling or expression of homosexual desire on the part of the individual, with the exception of ‘bisexuals’ (who are therefore thought of as belonging to an entirely separate ‘sexuality’ ... Homosexuality is part of a new system of sexuality, which functions as a means of personal individuation: it assigns to each individual a sexual orientation and a sexual identity” (Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, p. 134).
significant gap between what the category of the “heterosexual” literally means and how it is performed in everyday life. This gap makes this behavior really queer.

These and many other practices evidence that, in terms of desire, our present is as opaque as the past and it resists a neat thematization under the framework of “sexual identity/sexual orientation.” Although the overarching dominant discourse of sexual identity strives to subsume every erotic experience under its power and seeks to encompass the experiences of males and females that organize their desire exclusively around the gender axis, such categorization occludes desire’s diversity and artificially lumps together the virtually infinite ways in which different persons organize their desires.82 Therefore, I submit, the incapacity of the present to define itself in terms of desire destabilizes any attempt to read the past in exclusively continuous or discontinuous terms.

In fact, Halperin and Martin are only able to follow such a strategy by presenting the present in pristine, definable terms. Foregrounding “alteritism,” and advocating for a historical gap between the classical and the contemporary period, Halperin argues:

This type of homosexual relationship between males, which the Greeks of the classical period designated by paiderastia, or “paederasty,” is conceptually and sociologically distinct from what is referred nowadays as male “homosexuality”: although lots of gay men I know often or even always choose partners who differ from themselves in age or race or nationality or body type or preferred sexual role, reciprocal relations between adults and even persons of similar ages constitutes the norms for

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82 In reflecting on historiography from this perspective, Valerie Traub notes that “the incoherences of erotic identities generally are papered over in an attempt to uphold binary gender as the privileged indicator of emotional affect and erotic desire. Despite the common-sense appeal of finding in the biological sex of one's erotic partner the prime indicator of ‘sexual orientation,’ desire, I believe, is not easily oriented. Both desire and its related gender identifications can transit across identity categories and, following indeterminate trajectories, produce configurations of eroticisms eccentric to the binaries of sex (male/female), gender (masculine/feminine), and sexuality (hetero/homo)” (Valerie Traub, The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England [Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002], p. 14). Similarly, Dinshaw proposes a vision of history where present and past identities juxtapose, touch upon each other, because what we consider under the rubric of “sex” is always dependent on cultural phenomena and thus contradictory and fractured (Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern [Durham: Duke University Press, 1999], p. 12).
gay male relationships in most bourgeois societies today. Although some people may identify themselves as tops or bottoms, sexual roles are not rigidly polarized and it is not considered outlandish for two men to take turns fucking each other—though modern sexual ideology doubtless tends to overplay sexual mutuality and to mute polarities or asymmetries in sexual roles among men.83

I take issue with the colonization that mainstream contemporary sexuality performs on present marginal practices and how such colonization is made the focal point in reading the past. Although “role swapping appears to be the norm in gay male relations today,”84 and equality of status might be the preferred option for bourgeois cosmopolitan men who identify as gay, I posit the following heuristic question: What are the advantages of taking “dominant sexual culture” as the hermeneutical lens from which different contemporary readers approach their dis/identifications with the past? For many men inequality—in terms of status, age, sexual self-identification, height, weight, body types, being out, etc.—defines desire. These experiences should not be read in light of the reciprocity that defines contemporary gay culture. As a matter of fact, recently new terms seek to capture the reality of proliferating desires in terms of inequality: daddies looking for sons, chasers looking for silver daddies, exec types for college jocks, straights for gays, fems for mascs, smooths for hairies, huskies for slims, blacks for Latinos, whites for Asians, straights for gays, white collars for blue collars, married for singles, bears for otters, and so on.85 Inequality is defined across multiple axes concerning body types, races, ages, nationalities, wealth, professions, social status, body parts, or even sexual orientation. Here the partner’s sex/gender is irrelevant as long as ritualized protocols of body types, erotic acts, and focus on certain body parts are observed.86

83 Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, p. 140; emphasis mine.
84 Ibid., p. 196 n. 3.
85 This male-centered set of examples is further complexified by the experiences and practices of individuals who do not identify as “male” or “female,” or configure their desires around persons outside those same categories.
86 Notice here how Halperin supports his argument by posing past and present as mutually exclusive systems: “the paederast’s capacity to eroticize elements of the human anatomy independently of the sex of the person whose anatomy is being eroticized.” And later he adds that “we” are unable to relate to such configurations because “most bourgeois Westerners nowadays tend to think of sexual object-choice as an expression of individual ‘sexuality,’ a fixed sexual disposition or orientation, over which no one has much (if any) control and for which reasons cannot be given: any reasons one might give for one’s
These phenomena suggest the inadequacy of flagging “sexual orientation” as the exclusive and unique criterion that distinguishes “us” from “them.” The impossibility to present “equality” as the privileged marker of contemporary sexual desires opens the door to new identifications with a past that is no longer entirely alien. The distance the discontinuist strategy seeks to implement is viable only if we take contemporary dominant sexual discourses at their face value. Given the complex morphologies of contemporary desires, why start with dominant culture in the first place? Why take the sexuality of professional males who fuck each other in urban settings, share a household, and parade in the gay rallies every year as the measuring rod for the un/likelihood of a dis/identification with the past/present? Why not start, rather, by looking through the lens of marginal sexualities not accounted for in mainstream culture in order to expand the epistemic/heuristic possibilities of the historiographical work? Considered from this angle, queer criticism becomes not only an analysis of the queer as opposed to the “normal” but also an examination of the gaps and ruptures that configure that which does not belong to the realm of the sexual. Paralleling Sedgwick’s formula, queer criticism might here be taken to mean not criticism through the categories of queer analysis but criticism of them, “mapping of the fractal borderlines between [queer] and its others.”

Such an approach is a performative act of debunking any attempt to normalize sexual desires, whether labeled as “hetero or homo.”

The alternative to discontinuism need not be a continuism à la Boswell, but a more nuanced account of desires across axes of gender/identification/tastes/orientations that does not foreclose virtual dis/identifications with other sexual object-choice seem to be mere afterthoughts, adventitious rationalizations, late cognitive arrivals on the scene of sexual speciation … Thus, sexual preference is not something that one can be argued logically out of or into – least of all by considerations of utility or convenience. And yet, those are precisely the sorts of considerations that Charicles invokes in order to demonstrate that women are superior vehicles of male sexual pleasure” (Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, p. 98).

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88 I have taken very seriously Sedgwick’s argument that to define someone’s sexuality at her expense is “a terribly consequential seizure.” Such move is of essence to the history of queerphobia and must be countered by paying close attention to self-reports in order to foster pluralism “on the heavily contested maps of sexual definition” (Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, p. 26).

89 For the same reasons that Halperin has explained so well versus Amy Richlin (David Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality, p. 156 n.10 and p. 167).
er times and spaces. If continuist historiographies unify desire across time and space, discontinuism unifies the erotic in synchronic chunks of time. Instead, by proposing “desire” as that which cannot be accounted for in univocal terms we can establish a relation with the past in terms of what Haraway calls “partial connections,” envisioning a self “partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simple there and original ... always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another,” something that Marchal has argued focusing on the biblical past. What our “joining” with the past will look like cannot be determined in advance but depends on the “self” performing the identification. In a way, stressing the indeterminacy of possible political identifications with the past shapes this historiographical style as a Foucauldian project because it does not discard the “oppositional potential even of grand narratives and continuist histories,” at the same time that it anchors future possible interpretations to a long tradition in biblical studies that advocates a through-and-through contextualization of the flesh-and-blood reader, although such tradition has been slow and reluctant to contextualize the erotic.


91 Donna Haraway, “The persistence of vision,” in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), The Visual Culture Reader (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 681. For this use of the “self” in historiography, see Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval, p. 14. Menon expresses this point masterfully when she asserts that “homosociality” “argues for the haphazard time of desire, resistant to the kind of identitarian legibility that historicism seeks to create for it” (Menon, Unhistorical Shakespeare, p. 3).


93 Fradenburg and Freccero, “Introduction,” p. xvii. Dinshaw suggests that instead of conceiving historical periods as the beads of a rosary, we would be better served by returning to Benjamin’s image of the “constellation” as a metaphor illustrating the ways in which past events relate to each other and to the present as “starry lights” shining at different times and in different places even as they are perceived at once (Dinshaw, Getting Medieval, p. 18). The work of the historian then, she adds, consists of “making pleasurable connections in a context of postmodern indeterminacy” (ibid., p. 36).

Conclusion

On one side, Halperin and Martin, among many others, pursue an identical strategy regarding historiography, but their ideological commitments differ: Halperin advocates for a strangeness from the past that unnaturalizes our contemporary regime, while Martin is more concerned with breaking any possible link with the power of the biblical on the present. If Halperin performs historicism for heuristic/epistemological purposes, Martin is committed to postmodern historicism in terms of the ethical. On the other side, Gagnon, Moo, and Brooten draw a straightforward line between the present and the past and assume, despite their different, even opposite, ideological commitments, an unbreached history of sexuality. Both historiographical strategies, I have been arguing, assume what a “homosexual” and a “lesbian” look like in the present. To different degrees the shared assumptions that there are sexual identities in the present and that they can be compared to sexual discourses in the past occlude the infinite ways in which queers configure and are configured by their desires.

Martin concludes that we have no way of knowing what Paul had in mind in Romans 1. No wonder that, if scholarly work is to be recounted, options are almost infinite: Paul might be referring to males with legitimate desires taken to illegitimate extremes, or to desires not in the realm of “sexuality,” or to “straights” that have given up their natural inclinations to lie with other men, or to males that are attracted to younger mates, or to women that are violating the patriarchal gender codes, or to “gays” and “lesbians” who have a disposition to enjoy homoerotic regardless of historical circumstances, or to desires that are a result of God’s punishment for idolatrous practices, etc. Continuism and alteritism only work on the condition that we exclusively choose one option in the present as a paradigm of what counts as sexual. However, the undecidability of desire, as Menon has shown, precludes such a hermeneutical, historiographical, and moral move and destabilizes any attempt to identify or disidentify in advance any past conception with any present practice. Even if we were able to ultimately identify “those men who burn in their desire toward

95 “Given our own probably unshakeable modern assumptions about love, sex, romance, and desire, we perhaps could never wholeheartedly accept the possibility, much less the desirability, of sex without desire. It is significant that no modern Christian church has attempted even to recognize, let alone appropriate, Paul’s ethic of sexuality here. And I would not advocate that it did so. Both Nussbaum’s advocacy of ancient philosophy and some Christians’ belief that our sexual ethics should come rather simplistically ‘from the Bible’ are just different forms of Classicism, which in my view is nostalgic and self-deluding” (Martin, Sex and the Single Savior, p. 76).
another man” with any specific group suggested in the scholarly repertoire, no straightforward link or line of identification could be drawn between “them” and “us.” In short, a radical anti-identitarian theory of desire envisions contemporary queer experiences as a “mobile target” that the moralizing biblical past (as interpreted by most continuists) is unable to hit, but also as a potential place of identification (contrary to alteritism) between what is queer now and what was queer back then.

Instead of envisioning “our” relationship with the past in terms of dis/continuity by assuming that the past is too alien or too similar, we need to enquire first who is the one performing the identification and to what purposes. In this way, past and present appear embedded in a complex web of desires with virtually infinite points of departure and arrival. The link between times and places becomes “a thick associational field” that does not guarantee any identification but neither forecloses any reappropriation. Romans 1:26–28 might, as Martin suggests, refer to males/females subjected to excessive desires or, as Moore, Stowers, and Halperin have stressed, to people violating the fixed protocols of gender and thus endangering the established notion of sex as an exercise in power. However, such interpretations do not preclude manifold identifications with the past. Contemporary queers who structure their desires on the basis of inequality, or who do not see their interactions as “sexual,” might want to see themselves in the mirror of those verses. If, to the contrary, the biblical verses refer, as Gagnon and Brooten argue, to “gays” and “lesbians,” contemporary queers who do not understand themselves within the homo/hetero framework will find in Romans a text that reinforces such binarism and thus is in need of deconstruction and disidentification.

It is hardly surprising that most arguments around “homosexuality and the New Testament,” whether theological or purely exegetical, feature prominent reflections on virtual consequences for the present. Both continuism and alteritism take the New Testament as authoritative for Christian communities and

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96 Traub, The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England, p. 12. Traub later explains the openness of such a version of historicism: “Balancing the claims of continuity and alterity within a historically specific study, I have tried to keep open the question of the relationship of present identities to past cultural formations – assuming neither that we will find in the past a mirror image of ourselves nor that the past is so utterly alien that we will find nothing usable in its fragmentary traces” (ibid., p. 32). Susan McCabe, entertaining the possibility of a queer historicism, emphasizes that “history is riddled by multiple desires,” and envisions the purpose of the historicizing task as “locating ‘identification’ (rather than identity), modes of being and having, in historical contexts” (Susan McCabe, “To Be and to Have, The Rise of Queer Historicism,” GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 11 [2005], pp. 119–34 [120–21]).
thus seek to offer an enlightening way out of the impasse. Continuism will unlikely dismiss a long-held Christian, not necessarily biblical, tradition that conceives of sex as “heterosex,” while alteritism will push interpretations that seek to thoroughly contextualize the past in its specificity. Queer historiography, at least in the version for which I am advocating, does not bluntly discard any or both approaches, but it forewarns against their attempts to capture and picture the present in univocal terms; instead, it calls for a much more thorough contextualization of their respective hermeneutical strategies. Our reading of the past cannot be an excuse to misrepresent the present.

Although Romans 1 plays a surprisingly small role in church debates over homosexuality, the discontinuist and continuist strategies around the text have tended to pose “queer” in opposition to “straight,” and most ironically to “gay/homosexual.” That is, while continuism tends to moralize around “gay and lesbian sex,” and alteritism disavows stigmatization by pushing an agenda of acceptance in religious communities, both picture a present exclusively in terms of “sexual identities.” One particular effect of this approach is that straight queer practices have remained unscrutinized. For instance, straight men that have sex with other men remain outside the debate and thus privileged by invisibility. What appears to be a gay-friendly argument ends up, in some cases, stigmatizing present queer practices by foreclosing partial or temporary continuities between queer sexual preferences in the present and in the past. Some of “us” (whether “gay” or “straight”) who, for instance, structure our desires (“sexual” or not) according to protocols of inequality across all different

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kinds of axes (gender, age, health, race, status, etc.) might want to look at that past outside of sexuality – in discontinuism’s terms – as a precursor of our attempt to dream of a present and of a future beyond dominant configurations. By paying more attention to the ways in which contemporary sexual practices skip the “homo/hetero” divide, we are better equipped to explore and examine future virtual identifications with the biblical past. Ironically, “leaving the natural use of women to burn in their lust for each other” (Rom. 1:27) might trigger, after all, an examination of the ways in which “straights” are behaving queerly, and queers are skipping the traps of identity impositions.