

## The Narrative Case for Queer Biography<sup>1</sup>

To speculate on the future of queer theory, it's fruitful to begin by examining its ancestry. Like New Historicism and feminist inquiry, queer theory was born of a desire to "do justice to difference (individual, historical, cross-cultural), to contingency, to performative force, and to the possibility of change" (Sedgwick, *Touching* 93). In the late 1970s, scholars began to "puncture" the *grands récits* of criticism and history.<sup>2</sup> They wanted to *get real* and to do so they invoked particularly personal kinds of truth-claims, examining both the textured events of real lives and their own political position as critics, narrators, and historians. Dismantling and exposing cultural assumptions, their project became a critique of subjectivity itself. Their tool of inquiry was theory, which Jonathan Culler defines with elegant simplicity as "writing with effects beyond its original field." (3) Culler's definition reveals the inherent attraction to an *other* in the function of the form. Interdisciplinarity is itself a form of desire.

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1. A portion of section 3 was published in a slightly different form as "E. M. Forster and the Unpublished 'Scrapbook' of Gay History: 'Lest We Forget Him,'" *English Literature in Transition* 55.1 (2012): 19–31. I am grateful for permission to include it here. Thanks to Emma Kaufman for a thoughtful reading of an earlier manuscript, and concrete good advice.

2. The word *puncture* comes from Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt's *Practicing New Historicism* (49). I take up a longer consideration of their argument later in this chapter.

It's a particular irony that despite queer theory's focus on real bodies and material culture, it cut itself off from some of its richest evidence. From my liminal position as biographer and reader of queer theory I've found little dialogue between queer theory and gay social history, though both have been rich resources in my work. Having written a biography of E. M. Forster, a gay man who is sometimes deemed to have been insufficiently queer, I'm convinced that lifewriting could be the best ground to explore queer subjectivity. In this chapter, I'll explore how we got here, and suggest a way forward. My narrative case for queer biography addresses both the story of disciplinary tensions and the particular promise of narrative theory in returning the queer to the promise of "the possibility of change."

## Cross Dressing: Or, Temporality and Disciplinarity

Notions of time have always been at the heart of the queer. Queer theory's project helped to dismantle the myth of transcendent time and sequential time that had shaped humanist criticism for a generation. Scholars engaged in this task understood they were embedded in time; they felt the thrill of this critical moment. Almost immediately the smartest theorists began to think about the relations among these new questions in a temporal frame. In 1990 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick acknowledged the "almost irremediably slippery" relations between feminist and queer inquiry.<sup>3</sup> She did so, tellingly, by situating the inquiry in a temporal narrative frame:

The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But *we can't know in advance* how they will be different. (Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 27; emphasis mine)

Here Sedgwick anticipates the future of queer critical work. Her locution "antihomophobic inquiry" may sound a bit dated to our ears, tied as it is to the concept of gay identity. It does not have the rangy, capacious force of the queer, with its resistance to a hetero/homo binary, which opens the way to

3. The moment is ripe for such genealogies. The groundbreaking work in both queer and feminist inquiry is old enough to be our mother. It's been twenty years since Susan Lanser's "Toward a Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice" was first published. In May 2011 Project Narrative sponsored the prescient Queer and Feminist Narrative Theory Symposium that engendered this book. The Winter 2012 issue of *New Literary History* queries the future of postcolonial studies. Heather Love's most recent works returns to Erving Goffman; Sharon Marcus's to Clifford Geertz.



nonnormative identities beyond the sexual. But Sedgwick's figuration is prophetic in a different key. This passage warns those of us who care about the future of the queer to resist normativity in our framing of the story that is to come. She conceives of this danger as a narrative problem.

The latent queerness of this theoretical moment is visible in hindsight in a second example. In recounting the origins of the journal *Representations*, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt describe fierce discussions among scholar-friends as a "spectacle," a kind of queer performance:

The group came to understand, that there was, in interdisciplinary studies, a tendency to invoke, in support of one's own positions, arguments that sophisticated thinkers in those disciplines *had in fact been calling* into question. We had, as it were, been complacently dressing ourselves in each other's cast-off clothes . . . The spectacle was not entirely grotesque: some of the intellectual hand-me-downs looked surprisingly good on our friends. (3; emphasis mine)

The pluperfect progressive tense of Gallagher and Greenblatt's tale hints at a different temporal anxiety. Even at the beginning, it's all over, framed as teleology, embedded in time.

Even couched in a tone of wry bemusement, Gallagher and Greenblatt's words betray anxieties, the explorative work of these counterhistorians deliberately cast in an affective as well as an intellectual mode. The comical synecopation of *Representations'* founders' disciplinary inquiries betrayed their concern with "sophistication," with losing a step or two in the race to be at the forefront of an emerging field.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the metaphor of cross-dressing frames disciplinary inquiry as a sequential enterprise in time.

The New Historicists' predicament was shared, perhaps unconsciously, by scholars of queer discourse and representation. In 1990 Sedgwick could "not know in advance" how the tensions within "antihomophobic" inquiry would play out. We *can know* now, since *Epistemology of the Closet* has become a historical document. Queer theory wanted to move ahead, and the way it did so was to remove the confining clothing of its feminist mothers and its gay fathers. Butler's *Gender Trouble* began by being troubled with feminism. Theorists reappropriated the old pejorative term *queer*, arguing, as David Macey writes, that "homosexuality is a category of knowledge rather than a tangible

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4. And envy (resentment? regret?) too. "We experienced the odd sensation one might feel at seeing one's own discarded possessions sold at auction for a handsome profit" (4).



reality" (321).<sup>5</sup> Quite quickly, queer became a mark of futurity; gay was passé, an antiquating term, fixed in the particular temporal moment of modernism, sincere, self-chosen, anchored as a (seemingly) stable sexual identity. The term "queer," in contrast, began as an ironic appropriation of a pejorative slur. The queer encapsulated the process of reverse discourse, and gathered power as it distanced itself from the particular. The idea of the queer became more broadly synonymous with any nonnormative impulse.

Queer theory began, not just as a totalizing vision—but rather as a totally anti-essentialist one. The goal was to illustrate how *constructed*, how *unnatural* essentialist assumptions about identity were, not merely to observe how power worked on subjects. This may seem at first to be a question of scale, but actually it was a resistance to the perceived limitations of living in time. The concept of gay identity seemed too anchored in a particular historical moment, too determinative, too dependent on troublingly fixed conceptions of gender and difference.

This last point is most salient in comparing methodologies. The circumstances of lived gay lives, documented by scholars like George Chauncey, Ken Plummer, and Jeffrey Weeks, evinced a particularity of evidence in time and place that did not privilege the possibility of change. (For example, the men who identified as "queer," in Chauncey's study of a scandal at the Newport Naval Training Station in 1919, "reproduced many of the social forms of genderized heterosexuality, with some men playing 'the woman's part' in relationships with conventionally masculine 'husbands'" [193]. Is this queer or deeply normative? Or—queerly—beyond binary description?)

The queer resistance to the narrative of actual gay lives is not that they are too conventional, I think; nor that the evidence is archival and must be painstakingly gathered. Rather, the depressingly consistent evidence of homophobia reminds the theorist of the complex and often the limited agency of the queer subject. Rare is the evidence of unfettered freedom, of utopian escape from the narrative pull of pathos or tragedy. Queer heroes of the past *disappoint*.

The goal for theorists became instead to track and expose the operations of power—not to trace the narratives of individual lives. The fluidity of subject-formation invited a dispassionate separation from the "reality" of embodied selves. But this goal becomes, as Sedgwick points out in *Touching Feeling*,

5. For more detailed discussions of the reverse discourse of queer identity, see Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, Steven Seidman, *Queer Theory/Sociology*, and Joseph Bristow, *Sexuality*.



its own kind of normative rule, when queer policing of anti-essentialism becomes a kind of purity test. She calls this moment “the strange metamorphosis from anti-essentialist to ontological private eye” (110).

Sedgwick’s devotion to the full array of “narrative consequences” awakened this discovery, as did the strangeness of her bodily experience of dying over a prolonged span of time (124). Stepping back, thinking temporally, she repudiated a flattening impulse she found in some of her earlier work, and the work of other queer scholars. Tracing Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” to a pattern of exposing the falseness of dominant narratives that she called “paranoid reading,” Sedgwick posited that a habit of mind in queer studies had hardened into a methodological doctrine. It was not that there was anything essentially *untrue* about paranoia. “In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systematic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complacent” (126).

For Sedgwick, the important question for this method, or any method, was what does knowledge *do*? (124). She cannily saw that the temporal position encased in the paranoid critical approach required its practitioners to go backward, to fix the terms of the outcome so that it could be “exposed” in a revelatory flourish. She argued that the paranoid method was locked in a defensive posture whose first principle was “there must be no bad surprises” (130). In the paranoid stance, being “unanticipated”—being caught off guard—was “more dangerous . . . than to be unchallenged” (133). Here is where the desire to stay ahead in queer theory paradoxically becomes a bind. Specifically, she finds the narrative structure of paranoia monotonously “inescapable,” “rigidly” tied to a temporal position both “*anticipatory and reactive*” (138, 130; emphasis mine). Sedgwick’s principal critique of the paranoid strain in queer inquiry was that it limited the narrative range of the possible.

The narrator—the theorist—subsumed the story. In *Touching Feeling* Sedgwick called out Judith Butler for her “tacit or ostensibly marginal but *in hindsight* originary and authorizing relation to different strains of queer theory” (129). In invoking the damning word “authorizing,” Sedgwick in effect charges Butler with hypocrisy. The “anticipatory and reactive” frame allows the queer theorist to appropriate an authorizing power at the moment she is celebrating creative misrule.

Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt argued, “Bodies cannot be reduced to representation” (15). The countermove of “reparative reading” meant reopening questions of “the biological,” and facing the final taboo of



the anti-essentialist enterprise in the queer. The local individual body and its feelings came to the center of Sedgwick's last inquiry. She believed that we need to think through the effect of theory-stories on real bodies. She imagined that exploring affect and effect on real bodies was an imaginative act that could engender new narrative forms.

For all its interest in performativity, the thrust of *Touching Feeling* is not to expose residual forms of essentialism lurking behind apparently nonessentialist forms of analysis. . . . I have tried . . . to explore some ways around the topos of depth or hiddenness. . . . *Beneath* and *behind* are hard enough to let go of; what has been even more difficult is to get a little distance from *beyond*, in particular the bossy gesture of "calling for" an imminently perfected critical or revolutionary practice that one can oneself only adumbrate. . . . The most salient preposition in *Touching Feeling* is probably *beside*. *Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism. (8)

At the end of her life Sedgwick was most interested in keeping the queerness of the story alive.

In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick rejected teleology (as she had years before in *Epistemology of the Closet*) in favor of an unfixed narrative. She did not forsake narrative for the promise of antinarrative. For her, rethinking narrative is better than forsaking it. Dying, she seemed positively relaxed about the prospect of the future. We don't know where the story will go. When we try to imagine the arc of queer theory in the future, we need to acknowledge the bind queer theory has written itself into: the almost ritualistic assertion of the unknowingness of inquiry, the predictable interpretive flourish in the *ta-dah* of unmasking (Sedgwick calls this "exposure"). We recognize it in the papers our students write, eagerly looking for our approval. The story of the history of sexuality has become formulaic because theory has become the story.

Asking "what does knowledge *do*?" (124) is an especially pointed question for teachers of the queer. In practice, in departments I have taught in and observed, the story of queerness is built foundationally on a handful of theoretical texts taught over and again in English and women's and gender studies classes. And in invoking this genealogy, we have ourselves created a normative epistemology and pedagogy. I add my voice to the chorus of voices in this book who are questioning the effects of insistent *retelling*. What are the effects of endlessly (for example) retelling the story of how a culture disciplines, and in doing so creates, its subjects? What is the purpose of this orthodoxy? What are we teaching? Can there never be a surprise, never a new story?

## Narratives of the Miniature and the Gigantic, or: The Queer in the World<sup>6</sup>

What *size* is a queer story? Ever since Clifford Geertz showed us that we must “widen out” to see culture at work, scholars have been wrestling with the question of scale of the evidence (19). The turn to the small and the contingent was impelled by resistance to bad storytelling—what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt call “Big Stories” that explain everything (51). To resist reifying proportionality and other manifestations of normativity, scholars turned to creative, metonymic forms, something richer and looser than the *exemplum*. The narrative forms of this impulse were most often small: the anecdote and the case.

The anecdote came first, because in the hands of the New Historicists it was the perfect tool to “puncture the historical *grand recit* into which it was inserted” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 49). For Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, the tool of the anecdote

offered access to the everyday, the place where things are actually done, the sphere of practice that even in its most awkward and inept articulations makes a claim on the truth that is denied to the most eloquent of literary texts. (48)

Though it seems like an affirmation of the value of cultural criticism, Gallagher and Greenblatt’s turn to “the place where things are actually done” reflects an anxiety about the authenticity of hermeneutics itself. The reversal of figure and ground have been an inevitable consequence of theory’s self-conscious attention to the affect of its practitioners; but the inquiry itself supplanted the object of study as the place to attend to.

That the anecdote in its handy shape seemed to offer a hold on “the real” was only one part of its appeal as a narrative tool. The selection of the anecdote, the decision of how to frame the example, felt like a creative act:

Several of us particularly wanted to hold on to our aesthetic pleasures; our desire for critical innovation; our interest in contingency, spontaneity, improvisation; our urge to pick up a tangential fact and watch its circulation; our sense of history’s unpredictable galvanic appearances and disappearances. (4)

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6. I want to acknowledge the influence in this essay, and in my life, of Susan Stewart’s *On Longing*.



The critical turn from the anecdote to the case was a movement toward still greater legitimacy and self-reflexivity. Scholars turned to “the case” as a more efficient unit of inquiry, because its framing encapsulates both story and the interpreter’s insight, both an event and the power to illuminate its meaning. In the summer of 2007 *Critical Inquiry* devoted two special issues edited by the queer scholar Lauren Berlant to consideration of the critical genre of “the case.”

There are several reasons that the case seemed to offer greater narrative possibility than the anecdote. Berlant argues that the authorizing function embedded in its structure, “the practice or expression of expertise” is the defining feature of the case (“What Does” 1). Framed as a problem that contains its own solution, the case is “animated by judgment” (“Case” 663). Because it only awakens under a critical eye, the narrative form seems to encompass a wider temporal range than a mere anecdote or event: “One might say that the case is *what an event can become*” (“Case” 670). The case is flexible in its applications, and notably interdisciplinary—whether from history, literature, psychoanalysis. Best of all, the case—as Berlant humorously implied—seems to offer critical distance: “The case represents a problem—an event that has animated some kind of judgment. Any enigma could do . . . any irritating obstacle to clarity” (663).

Berlant is at once mocking and invoking the concept of narrative closure here. But since expertise is inscribed in its form, the case invites what Brian Carr calls “realtight” closure—the narrative position that “refuses” externality altogether (283). The narrative structure of the case is quite literally (to use Sedgwick’s terms) “anticipatory and reactive.” The case especially features a static mimetic structure. We must stop to look at the case, to watch it expertly be solved. It is designed to be solved.

Thus, in a *mise-en-abîme*, while the case promises to lay open the event and its terms of critical scrutiny, often embedded it becomes invoked tautologically in sweeping pseudonarratives in queer studies.<sup>7</sup> Two monitory occasions prove the case is an ill-fitting form for exploring real queer lives. Michel Foucault’s late work is the apotheosis of this tendency. Toward the end of his life, Foucault imagined collecting “an anthology of existences,” of what he called infamous men—“singular lives . . . those which have become . . . strange poems: that is what I wanted to gather in a sort of herbarium” (76). This is the life-as-case *par excellence*. Foucault’s detachment is exquisite and revelatory. The scholar who unveiled the process by which the homosexual

7. For a thoughtful critique of the “moralistic tautology” in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Vol. I, see Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* 9–13.



became marked culturally as a “species” has fashioned biography into *specimen* (43).

Theorizing real queer bodies into encoded metaphors can actually do harm. Jay Prosser argues that Judith Butler’s celebration of the subversive power of “ambivalent significance in performative (transgender) crossings” rather misses the point. Butler celebrates the transgressive power of Venus Xtravaganza, a drag performer interviewed in Jennie Livingstone’s 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*. But in the lived world, Venus Xtravaganza was often beaten and was subsequently murdered. Prosser writes drily, “Butler’s essay [“Gender Is Burning”] locates transgressive value in that which makes the subject’s real life most unsafe” (49). By awakening us to the lived experience of transgendered people, Prosser detaches us from detachment and calls us to empathy. Neither the anecdote nor the case preemptively solves the narrative problems of the inherent questions of scale and authenticity in queer narrative.

## The Form of a Queer Past

*Beside* is an interesting preposition because there’s nothing very dualistic about it. . . . *Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: . . . cause versus effect, subject versus object.

—Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*

And what of the lived queer experience in time? Who are the bodies under these clothes?

In his narrative meditation *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*, the queer playwright Neil Bartlett interrogates the example of Oscar Wilde. As one of a generation of gay men who came to London in the 1980s, Bartlett has imbued Wilde with mystical power. In a creative *tour de force*, Bartlett explores the complexities of queer identification with the figure of Wilde, whose life is a Möbius strip of paradox: he was not only a martyr, he was also a liar. The chapters are titled history, flowers, faces, words, evidence, forgery, possessions, pretexts, messages, history, notes. It’s not really possible to describe or categorize this queer life narrative. More of a *beside* narrative function than a case, *Who Was That Man?* positions itself *beside* its subject, somewhere in the textural play of what a story—a historical story—is and how it means.

The first way it does so is to recalibrate the normative audience. Bartlett directs his observations toward an inclusive “us,” himself and his queer audience. Alan Sinfield argues that Bartlett’s assumption of the queer “we” is the first such usage, a seminal moment in the history of queer scholarship (4).

Bartlett demonstrates that the construction of a queer canon—what I would call a documentable queer textual past—is foundational to the construction of gay identity. For him queer inquiry and identity necessarily shape each other. In describing his own youthful attempt to recuperate the gay past, Bartlett writes:

The place I started looking for my story was not the city, but the [British] library . . . I pursued texts with the dogged energy I usually reserve for cruising; I became excited by the smallest hints; I scrutinized every gesture for significance . . . I went to the most unlikely places. (26, 28)

Bartlett’s desire for a transmittable past is linked wittily to more corporeal desires. Cruising and paying close attention to the hidden trail of gay literary legacy are metaphors for the same inquiry; indeed the methods sharpen and inform each other.

Bartlett’s search for “his story” has two modes: looking (cruising) and sharing the vulnerability of being seen to be looking. Though Bartlett’s metaphor is camp, it’s not about voyeurism. It’s about incompleteness. He understands that the social conditions of gay desire—whether for history or for love—mean that the act of discovery is always an act of risk-taking: in searching for the gay past “we are always held between ignorance and exposure” (99).

This suspended place in Bartlett corresponds to ways of reading and knowing. While the gaps of an incomplete reading offer a means of self-protection, they always isolate the person looking for his own identity. Incompleteness is a figure of a kind of safety: to “read” is to risk making connections. To be seen reading, or to share secret readings, courts the danger of being seen to be looking. This incompleteness is both singular and collective. Bartlett’s “we” can’t be “ourselves” without a queer culture, because we can’t recognize “ourselves” without a communal sense of the signs of a queer self; and “we” are always suspended between being alone and finding a community. Bartlett’s subject—the gay man trolling for a past—is a reader locked in a paradox of mixed over- and underdetermination.<sup>8</sup> The “safety” of underdeter-

8. *A Passage to India* prefigures Bartlett’s configuration of the gay subject position. Forster’s realization in *A Passage to India* that the negative space of the connection he sought was



mined or incomplete reading simultaneously erases the collective activity of gay culture, and people forget. That is why gay writers must keep discovering gay culture over and over again: Suspended between overdetermination and underdetermination, the gay past is always simultaneously being forgotten and recuperable.

Bartlett seeks a form of narrative that will be “true” to the problems of incompleteness without paralyzing the reader or erasing the possibility of building a queer culture. For him the interdependence of gay male subjectivity (who “we” are) and the power to interpret (to “fill in the gaps”) reinforce each other. There is always a space for wanting in these constituent elements of constructing queer identity. This is why Bartlett believes that the only “true history” of queer culture must exist in a particularly fractured form. He argues that pastiche is the only possible genre for a gay canon since it “embodies [the] omissions” inherent in gay identity: “*The scrapbook is the true form of our history*, since it records what we remember, and embodies in its omissions both how we remember and how we forget our lives” (99).

In one sense, in my experience of the archives, Bartlett’s axiom has proved to be literally true. Over and again in the archives, I found shards of evidence pasted into books by queer men—the scrapbooks of George Platt Lynes, Carl Van Vechten, E. M. Forster. But as figure, this queer embodiment of history has particular power: how can we embody in omissions the possibilities of queer life? How can this *besideness*, this space, help those of us who look to the queer past dodge “a seemingly unavoidable repetition and reification” of what it means for lives to be queer (Sedgwick 9)?

## The Promise of Queer Biography

At the Project Narrative conference in 2011, I heard a lot of yearning for the empirical, the inductive, the grounded. These are ways of acknowledging that

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the gap of desire itself, engendered in him a much more frank and homoerotic reading of the world. The people in the novel are always wanting, in both senses of the word: lacking and desiring. In this gap he places Prof. Godbole’s curious song of invitation, which simultaneously represents the desire to connect and the impossibility of connection:

I say to Shri Krishna “Come! Come to me only.” The god refuses to come. I grew humble and say: “Do not come to me only. Multiply yourself into a hundred Krishna’s, and let each one go to each of my hundred companions, but one, . . . come to me.” He refuses to come. This is repeated several times. . . .

“But he comes in some other song, I hope?” said Mrs. Moore gently.

“Oh no, he refuses to come,” repeated Godbole. “I say to Him, Come come, come come, come come. He neglects to come.” (85)



theory has occluded a part of the story. My part in the symposium, I believe, was to meditate on the practical relation between textured lives and the innovations of queer (and in my case, also feminist) theory in biography. After all, I had spent a decade writing a recuperative biography of the British novelist E. M. Forster, which is a pretty queer thing to do.

For me biography was not a *via media*, a synthetic exercise of finding a middle ground between the past and the present, but an *electrical ground* between theory and history. I spent more than a decade shuttling between the sliver of text, the piece of ephemera in the archive, and the larger cultural inquiry that would open us to a different biographical form.

On the face of it, we already know the story of Forster's life—or several stories, all of them quite conventional. Forster was an Edwardian writer, whose novels of manners like *A Room with a View* and *Howards End* inspired the Merchant Ivory costume dramas; a man who published *A Passage to India* in 1924 and then packed it in, living almost another fifty years. Or there's the posthumous story, a conventional story of a closeted man who lived with his doting mother until he was almost seventy. These stories are incompletely true. Over the course of the second half of his long life, E. M. Forster cultivated and collaborated in the persistent myth of his benign Edwardian presence. He understood how his sexuality necessitated the bifurcation of his public and private lives, how it shaped and distorted his writing. Forster demanded that his authorized biography—P. N. Furbank's 1978 *E. M. Forster*—should be candid and frank about his homosexuality. But he also understood that the redress of the posthumous life cannot possibly extinguish the foundational narrative that erased and ignored his queer existence.

Forster also shrewdly, painstakingly preserved an archive of his private life. The scrapbook was the true form of my method as a biographer. Researching *A Great Unrecorded History: A New Life of E. M. Forster*, it was difficult to find the evidence—or sometimes to recognize it as evidentiary at all. (Once, during an interview with one of Forster's friends in a sitting room in Hampstead London, I saw a perfectly conventional black and white photograph of Forster as a grand man of letters on a bookshelf. It turned out to be the anomaly—the only “straight” portrait in a sequence taken of Forster and his partner, the policeman Bob Buckingham, by the noted queer photographer George Platt Lynes.)

It was difficult too to frame the meaning of Forster's life in terms legible both to my subject and to contemporary readers. Making the events of a singular subject's life legible to other humans at a later moment in time demands that we pull back into the past, to the now-lost frame of reference that the cultural art historian Michael Baxandall called “the period eye.” This



is particularly important when writing about a man like Forster, who understood his sexual identity to be central to his writing and his life, but did not describe himself in terms like gay or queer. He only knew he “did not resemble other people” and repudiated labels as part of a “herd instinct” to oppression.<sup>9</sup>

Inevitably my biography was deeply informed by queer theory, and by the innovations at the heart of both feminist and queer inquiry—Crenshaw’s intersectionality, Butler’s performativity, Scarry’s embodiment. Forster’s life is a story full of cross-dressing, canny appropriations of power/knowledge, and sad, funny, surprising occasions of intersectionality. I’ll offer just one example. While serving as a Red Cross searcher during the First World War in Alexandria, Forster fell in love with a young Egyptian tram-driver named Mohammed el Adl. After meeting many times as Forster rode the tram, the two arranged their first private assignation.

The encounter began like an O. Henry story. Forster brought another hapless gift, the kind of expensive sticky cakes he had heard were a particular delicacy for Egyptians. He did not know that el Adl’s mother had warned him against taking sweets from strangers. Though we know Forster to be an unimposing and sincere personage, el Adl later told Forster he feared they might be drugged. For his part, el Adl stood beside Forster for some time, unrecognized. [Forster] didn’t see him because he came in an unexpected disguise: in complete tennis whites, right down to the gutta-percha-soled shoes. For ten full minutes, the sensitive Red Cross searcher had been looking past him, unconsciously seeking the familiar uniform. But Mohammed came disguised as a British gentleman. (Moffat 156)

Quite soon the two men made canny use of public space, depending on the colonial misapprehension that men of their race and class must be master and servant. Disgusted by British imperialism, Forster used it to extend metaphorical cover to his lover. But even in private, they conducted a tongue-in-cheek riff on cross-dressing.

[Ed Adl] took great pleasure in teasing [Forster] about his shabby clothing and great pride in the care of his own dress. “Taking me by the sleeve last

9. E. M. Forster describes the colonial attitude of the English in Chandrapore anthropologically, as the “herd-instinct” in chapter 7 of *A Passage to India*. His diary entry that “I do not resemble other people,” dates to 13 December 1907. (The diary reposes in King’s College Archive Centre in Cambridge.) For a reading of Forster’s use of the “herd-instinct” as a metaphor for homophobia, see my *A Great Unrecorded History: A New Life of E. M. Forster* 36, 131, 245.

night he said gently, 'You know Forster, though I am poorer than you I would never been seen in such a coat. I am not blaming you—no, I praise—but I would never be seen, and your hat has a hole and your boots have a hole and your socks have a hole.'" "Good clothes are an infectious disease," Mohammed admitted. "I had much better not care and look like you, and so perhaps I will, but only in Alexandria." He wouldn't be seen like that at home. The young man who first appeared in blinding tennis whites knew how to distinguish himself and how to become inconspicuous. (167)

The men consciously and playfully appropriated costume as disguise and parodically subversive tokens of their queer status. When el Adl had to leave Forster to work in the Canal Zone in 1918, Forster arranged to have his photograph taken as a keepsake. The young man arrived for the session wearing his lover's shabby khaki military uniform. "In another queer cultural cross-dressing, that summer the men commissioned a single dress suit, too big for Mohammed, slightly too small for Morgan, for them to share" (167). Without a queer eye to the relations between texts and visual evidence, these subtle queer gestures can be flattened or occluded as they recede into the past. That photograph of Mohammed is now lost. Another, that survives, shows him "resplendent" in Egyptian dress—no doubt enacting an orientalist fantasy for the viewer. A recuperative reading reveals that despite his subaltern position, Mohammed had real agency.

Biography is a kinetic art. The archives revealed Forster as a figure very close to Lauren Berlant's concept of the queer subject. In a recent interview in *Biography*, she says:

I have a really different view of the subject, and this is what I'm trying to write into being. I think it begins and proceeds as a porous and disorganized thing that is constantly impelled (compelled and desiring) to take up positions in relations to objects, worlds, and situations, but the available clarifying genres of personhood underdescribe the range of practices, knowledges, impulses, and orientations that people have when they're foregrounding being this or that kind of thing at a particular moment. (187)

And how could it not be so for a gay man who was a teenager when Wilde was sent to prison, and died a year after the Stonewall riots? It is impossible to untangle the public and the private in Forster's story. They are alloyed by his sexuality, and his cultural knowledge that "what the public really loathes in homosexuality is not the thing itself but having to think about it" ("Notes" 220). Think about it he did. Shot through Forster's life and work is a complex



narrative interplay, a consciousness of this life and the life to come, an acknowledgment of multiple audiences.

Narrative biography is perhaps the most predictable of literary forms. (When I decided to begin my story at the birth of Forster's posthumous life; my British publisher, convinced the audience would be confounded by a nonchronological life story, suggested that I call that chapter a prologue, not chapter 1.) And yet Forster's life curled back on itself. So dependent on literary convention, so embedded in the circumstances of gay history, Forster's life was ineluctably queer, partly because so much of its textual evidence had been preserved, like a bee in amber, for a future life.

Christopher Isherwood's critical exhortation to his friend John Lehmann as they undertook the editing of *Maurice*, Forster's posthumously published queer novel, became my narrative touchstone: "Unless you start with the fact that he was homosexual, nothing's any good at all" (Lehmann 121). *Start* with the fact. Begin with the queer subject. It took me several years of thinking about this—and reading Neil Bartlett's work—to understand what Isherwood meant. For Isherwood, starting was not only a temporal but a subject position—a realignment with a queer "us." After my book was published, I noticed that some reviewers thought they knew what this statement meant and the story it implied: their emphasis was on the *homosexual*. But Isherwood meant to emphasize the word *start*. He wanted from here on in to set the frame of reference toward the queer.

Following Isherwood's instructions, I started with a very simple question that turned into very complicated research. I wondered: what did Forster think and feel about his desire? I tried as much as I could to find out how he would have understood his own experience, amply helped by the fact that he is a magnificent and sensitive observer of his own psyche and body. His bifurcation of the public and the private caused a temporal rupture—a posthumous overlay of counterinterpretation. But starting with the facts meant interpellation of the diaries and letters, the secret queer writing, the photograph and stories of his friends. Realignment of the newly discovered truth that was there from the start with the received knowledge of his public life and writing does not yield seamless integration. The simplest narrative questions—what was the tone of his story?—proved the most complicated to articulate.

Forster's story and the story of finding Forster's story in the archive, too, were interwoven in complex ways. Both had their own closetedness and queerness. The archive was an excellent place to observe the cultural operations of homophobia at work. Almost the first day of my reading in King's College archive, I came across an innocuous little unpublished essay entitled "My Books and I." What I supposed would be a reflection of his habit of acquiring



a library over time was revealed to be a thoughtful, funny essay, read aloud to Virginia Woolf and Maynard Keynes among others, on his coming to consciousness as a gay writer. When I found this essay it had been sitting in plain sight for almost thirty years. Numberless scholars had been looking at—and looking through—this little memoir. Yet the essay “My Books and I” remains unpublished—except as an appendix to the British edition of his novel *The Longest Journey*. Even now, the normalized myth of Forster exerts considerable power. Philip Gardner’s authorized edition of Forster’s journals and diaries, published in 2011, omits almost all Forster’s significant reflections on his sexual feelings. Isherwood, who thought that the whole of literary history would be upended by the publication of *Maurice* in 1970, saw to his chagrin how puny his efforts to reframe the Forster myth were. I’m sure I’ll have to get in line behind him.

In the past few years, the fruit of careful work in the archives has brought new queer lives, and lives newly queered, into the mainstream of American publishing. Justin Spring’s *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade*; Tripp Evans’s *Grant Wood: A New Life*; and Lisa Cohen’s *All We Know: Three Lives* (among others) show how the circumstances, the canon, and the evidence of queerness in the past is (to paraphrase Virginia Woolf) a little other than custom would have us believe.

We can’t rush on to the future of queer studies because we don’t know the story yet. I’m arguing that the future of queer theory is in the past. It will come in queer life work. Sexual biography is reparative work because it is so full of surprises. It consistently punctures our theoretical “understandings.” We have so much work to do going backwards. I can tell you that we really are just beginning to know these stories. Then, once we have more real stories of sexuality, we can resume theorizing them.

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