

**Review of *After Homosexual: The Legacies of Gay Liberation*.
2013. Edited by Carolyn D’Cruz, Mark Pendleton.
Moorebank: UWA Publishing ISBN 978-1742583457.**

Queering time and memory through reading *After Homosexual*

MARGARET MAYHEW

Someone will remember us

I say

Even in another time

Sappho

I want a future that lives up to my past

David McDiarmid

After Homosexual is an edited collection derived from a three-day conference held in the antipodean summer of 2011-2012 to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Dennis Altman’s book *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*. It could have been a dry or hagiographic tribute to an eminence gris of Gay politics, however the editors have chosen to construct it as a critical genealogy rather than a patrilineage; thus offering far more than a

simple nostalgia trip about Gay and Lesbian Liberation in Australia. Produced in collaboration with the Australian Gay and Lesbian Archives, the editors have assembled essays, transcripts, manifestos and memoirs in order to provoke a critical reflection on time, history and legacy in relation to the queer subjectivities contingent with emergence of Homosexual Liberation as described in Altman's original work.

Rather than narrating the history of homosexual activism or that of a singular GLTBIQ movement in Australia, *After Homosexual* evokes an unfolding of identity throughout four decades of social change. As noted by editors D'Cruz and Pendleton in their introduction, the title alone could be a prelude to a question: "After Homosexual, then who?" with the answer implied by the cascade of expanding acronyms used in contemporary advocacy: Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual, Intersex and Queer. However, the strength of this volume is to draw on Altman's work to contest this trajectory; the homosexual is not a fixed category to be included within existing human rights, but a contingent subject who emerges in conditions of sexual repression and who will hopefully dissolve in conditions of sexual liberation.

The book is divided into three sections; consisting of reflections of a range of Gay, Lesbian, Aboriginal, Feminist and socialist activists from the 1970s, followed by a dossier of archival images and texts, and a final section "moving on" of contemporary activists and academics considering the latter impact of Altman's work on their work in queer-affiliated practice and research. This tripartite structure sets the tone for much of the chapters within who all shift between the past, the present and the future of the worlds evoked by *Homosexual*. These worlds encompass gay liberation and sexual liberation, the emergence of GLTBIQ advocacy, as well as queer theory and activism. Through these refractions, Altman's own ambivalence towards the category of "the homosexual" is queried in a particularly queer way, whereby categories and definitions come unstuck from particular times and particular places, and hinge towards futures where impossible subjects come into being, and desire lines may be redrawn.

After Homosexual is intimately linked to broader questions of queer history, and methodological questions of what, why and how queer subjects narrate histories. I emphasize queer, rather than gay and lesbian or GLBTIQ, because of the ambivalence of Altman, and many of the contributors to this book, about the ontology of the homosexual subject and the imbrication of this questioning with activism that challenged gender roles and identity and challenged the social order of sexual repression and gendered and racial oppression. The breadth of contributions; from HIV/AIDS activists, sex worker activists as well as gay, lesbian and feminists activists and academics evoke the extent to which *Homosexual* has had an impact on a range of social movements. The list is limited, however, with a notable absence of contributions addressing transgender experiences and activism as well as the recent emergence of intersex advocacy movements and genderqueer activism in Australia. Altman's recent work has addressed the disparate experiences of homosexual subjects in a range of countries, and it would have been good to have had more contributions from some of the speakers at the 2012 conference who discussed transnational and racialised experiences of gays, lesbians and trans* folk.

A remarkable feature of *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* was in Altman's ability to speak between and across different social spheres. In the 1970s he drew on activist manifestos of Gay Liberation, combining them with a scholarly consideration of Freud and Marcuse. The contributors describe *Homosexual* not so much as an academic text than as a work of scholarship accessible to a broader reading public. It opened borders between activism and academia, much in the way that Altman's appearance on television as a public homosexual (and public intellectual) opened up a sphere for public discourses inclusive of gay men and lesbians. Richard Walsh narrates the enabling interest of mainstream Australian media in the 1970s in cultivating local public intellectuals from counter culture, feminist and gay liberation movements, for publishing and promoting their works in paperback. The exception to this were members of the Aboriginal Black Power movement, whose significant work in dramatically reshaping Australian society in the 1960s and 1970s was not associated with a particular text, and black spokespeople were portrayed as extremists radicals

rather than as the public intellectuals that many were. *After Homosexual* redresses this exclusion in its first section of reflections on the social context of *Homosexual* by including Gary Foley alongside Anne Summers, Raewyn Connell, Gary Wotherspoon, Barbara Creed and other contemporaries of the early years of homosexual liberation. Foley's account of black gay journalist John Newfong, and the embodied links between activists across a range of political movements and social settings, provides a vivid illustration of the strength of identity politics when working to acknowledge and challenge the diffuse entanglements of power over the lives of marginalised people.

The historical accounts in the early section of *After Homosexual* do not function to produce a definitive account of the Gay Liberation movement. As Altman writes in his endnote to the book: "We all remember events differently [...] but it is by pooling memories that we write history and write ourselves, as queers, into history" (D'Cruz and Pendleton 2013, 311). Rather than drawing a lineage of gay and lesbian activism, *After Homosexual* evokes a field of connections and possibilities; temporal tangents of contingent futures and the past springing into the present. In doing so, *After Homosexual* is an exemplar of queer genealogy itself and modes of reflecting on social history that are intertextual and refractory. It enables the reader to engage with Altman's text through the readings and reflections of other readers, and to sense how his (proto-Foucaultian) account of the emergence of the homosexual as a subject category contingent on a particular circumstances of modernist sexual repression is refracted through a range of social and political movements.

Many of the contributors to *After Homosexual* note that Altman's final chapter titled *The End Of The Homosexual* anticipates a future free of sexual categories. Four decades later, the queer subjects of sexual liberation activism labour within a consumerist recuperation of sexual identity, where the homosexual has become subsumed in certain capitalist democracies within a normative account of subjectivity that is monogamous, binary gendered, mostly white (or white assimilated) and contentedly consumerist. Within this "homo-normative" present, homosexual oppression is perceived as redundant; a figment of an

intolerant past, or (as in homonationalism) a symptom of "backward" cultures. In the introduction, the editors noted this view of queer history as redundant as permeating the response of some publishers to their proposal for *After Homosexual*: "The idea that the use by date for a book such as this was fast approaching as the movement was perceived as being on the threshold of "success". Such a "success" would come presumably with the passing of legislation for gay marriage." (5). To their credit, D'Cruz and Pendleton use this discourse of redundancy as the ground on which contributors respond and reflect. As they state: What brings the disparate voices in this book together is a sense that they are writing from a time well after the book *homosexual*. What possibly separates them is the extent to which they are writing after homosexual identity politics, and Altman's utopian imagining of "The end of the homosexual" (5). The reflection on history, on the queer past and the queer present, is a testament to the peculiar vitality of queer archives and queer histories to queer subjects, and how the deeply affecting, embodied relationship between the present and the past inflects ways of doing queer history and experiencing queer time.

The editors comments reminded me a great deal of Heather Love's reflections in *Feeling Backwards: Loss and Politics of Queer History*. Love examines the discourse of redundancy articulated by D'Cruz and Pendleton; that queer activism is part of history, and another time, when queers had it worse than now: Today, many critics attest that since Stonewall, the worst difficulties of queer life are behind us. Yet the discomfort that contemporary queer subjects continue to feel in response to the most harrowing representations from the past attests to their continuing resonance (Love, 2009, 32). This discomfort is linked the resounding hauntology of homosexual oppression, largely denied through discourses of tolerance and legal recognition, and yet, a profound and ubiquitous part of embodied queer existence.

Queers especially have bodily relationship to history, where we dig into the archive to find an encounter with the past that shatters the present; that makes it exciting and affecting. The manifestos in the middle section of the book serve

this purpose – astoundingly fresh and urgent; words leap across generations, and past the mullet haircuts and high waisted jeans in the photographs to prise open the present. Martha Shelley’s works in *Gay Is Good* manifesto were written before I was born, and yet their fire has a shuddering pertinence to now:

“Liberalism isn’t good enough for us. We are only just beginning to discover it. Your friendly smile of acceptance from the safe positions of heterosexuality – isn’t enough. As long as you cherish that secret belief that you are a little bit better, because you sleep with the opposite sex, to are still asleep in your cradle and we will be the nightmare that awakens you.” (1970, 142).

Shelley’s words were echoed in *Homosexual*, such is this quotation, redeployed by Marc Pendleton in his chapter on “Suspended Histories”: “Just as liberals would like to forget that blacks, because of the colour of their skin, have quite different social experiences to whites, so liberals would prefer to regard homosexuals as people who happen to be attracted to others of the same sex, without recognising how far that single fact becomes an essential part of their whole being” (Altman, 1973, 231 in Pendleton, in D’Cruz and Pendleton, 2014, 305).

The strength of *After Homosexual* is in the intertextual layering within and between each of the sections and many of the chapters. Altman’s 1971 work is enmeshed in reflections of its readers, and in speeches and manifestos by Altman and others, that informed the writing of *Homosexual*, and its reception by readers invested in sexual liberation and social change. *After Homosexual* offers multiple refracted glimpses of Altman’s *Homosexual*, flitting through the edges of narratives and quotations, bleeding into the dossier of gay liberation, and dancing in the minds of latter queer activists with a range of other writers such as David Halperin, Michael Warner, Jose Esteban Munoz and Sasha Soldatow.

John Whittier Treat’s chapter on same sex marriage and the apparitional child provides a compelling consideration of the question of time and lineage among a community of those defined through our distinction from naturalised biological

modes of progeneration. His chapter is based around a critique of “gayby” politics and the push for same sex marriage, which he reflects on through a return to Altman’s own consideration of Marcuse. Many of the chapters are critical of the gaystreaming of identity politics in the North America, Europe and Australia, and there is an unfortunate absence of contributions from the feminist activist generations of lesbian parents, many of whom have been deeply involved in activist movements of alternative kinship. Whittier-Treat’s chapter on the child as figment evokes a deeper consideration of the relationship between ontology and temporality that continues to plague queer theorists and historians.

The problematic positioning of “the homosexual” as someone who does not sexually reproduce, tacitly implies a severing of the linked between past, present and the future. Without the assumed projection onto familial progeny, time, and our relation to it becomes profoundly queered. This is either embraced through a nihilistic hedonism, tragically embodied in the plague years, and best encapsulated in artist David McDiarmid’s rainbow poster declaring *The Family Tree Stops Here Darling*. The galvanising nihilism of 1980s queer politics is threaded through Mark Pendleton’s discussion of David Wojnarowicz, in Liam Leonard’s account of Michael Warner, as well as what Christos Tsiolkas evokes as the palpable rage of Sasha Soldatow. Outside of this volume, queer theorists such as Heather Love contrast this with an approach to queer history as a form of camp melancholia; an emotional, obsessive longing for the archive as an attempt to trace an invisible history from the past to the present. She cites Anne Carson and Renee Vivienne’s work on translating lines attributed to the ancient Greek poet Sappho: *Some day/I say/Someone will remember me*, as an example of affective dimension of feeding desire lines into the past, in the hope of generating a memory of the present.

The melancholic approach to history is derived from and feeds into a sense of queerness as absence, as being excised from and deprived of the legitimated lineages of reproductivity. It runs counter to the modes of queer genealogy as described by Michel Foucault, which evokes the absence of generational

lineage as the space for the creation of a sprawling genealogy; a spreading constellation of chance encounters, flashpoints, frissons enmeshed with desires. Foucault's evocation of genealogy according to the tearoom/pickup/beat is (sadly) not the experience of every queer; however the promise embedded in the fleeting random connection; the flashpoint of hidden desires shimmering through time and space is common to anyone who experiences their body/their sex/their love as transgressive, marginalised or unspeakable. It is also evoked in Jose Esteban Munoz's *Cruising Utopia*, and examined in relation to Altman's *Homosexual* by Jasmine McGowan, who reiterates the affinity between Altman's work, and the how queer genealogy changes ways of doing and understanding history, as much as the content of particular narratives.

Michel Foucault evokes genealogy as a challenge to the understanding of our identities as subjects, as in this oft-repeated quotation: "History becomes "effective" to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being—as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself. "Effective" history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting" (1994 , 380).

Foucault's words remind us that to read a work of history, and particularly queer history, has a profound resonance for queer subjects, who do not experience history as a lineage, but as a complex and fractured genealogy, refracted by our desire lines of digging beneath legitimated historical narratives of queer invisibility, and our anticipation of a future than is devoid of the mandated lineage of reproductivity. Without a reproductive genealogy of patrilineage, queer genealogies draw on fragmented kinships, disrupting the boundaries of past and present, defying the pasts that are bequeathed to progeny, while excavating pasts that are hidden; refusing to defer pleasure or project aspirations onto future generations, but insisting that pleasure must be possible now, while deeply aware of its danger. The danger of contingency,

opens us up to the past, as in Walter Benjamin's aphorism on the philosophy of history: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." (1992, 247).

The moment of danger is embedded in the bodily experience of all queers, in the safety maps we use to monitor our behaviour and appearance in public. It resounds through the hauntology of Dennis Altman's words, cited by William Leonard as a form of psychic wounding: "We accept straight society's definitions of ourselves, and the need these impose on us to conceal our homosexuality, and hence remain apart from each other" (Leonard, in D'Cruz and Pendleton, 2014, 196). The psychic wound throbs at every single instance when we "come out" to a new acquaintance or challenge the everyday assumptions that our partner is opposite sex, or that we are monogamous, or don't engage in sex work or that we identify as the gender that is written on our birth certificates, or signified according to dominant cultural markers of male or female. It reminds us that personal choices can never be severed from the broader social relations that marginalise and subjugate the personal relations of everyone outside of the dominant gendered modes of heterosexual procreation.

After Homosexual attends to the hauntology of queer genealogy in every day life. The title invites the reader to attend to the intertwining of temporality and subjectivity; and the construction and contestation of the categories of identity politics through which queers and other subjects of radical sexual politics come to articulate our selves. For this reason most of the contributions resonate with a freshness and intensity about the present, and the queer relation to time that yearns for what David McDiarmid quipped as *A Future That Lives Up To My Past*. This past is revisioned not as a utopian imaginary or a nostalgic for the golden years of queer activism; it is antithetical to the melancholic longing of the stereotyped invert; the lesbian as lesser being, the young queer as sad, tormented and bullied, longing for a day when "it gets better". It is about the past that shocks us into a recognition; that strikes us at a moment of danger, that leaps into the present and is urgent, upsetting, and mildly arousing. The

ironic twists within this queer quipping of history and memory; longing for a future that lives up to this past flashpoint of revelation and intensity, evokes the power and importance of queer histories. The polyphonic power of *After Homosexual* is in the disparate dialogues and sprawling genealogies and the fleeting connections and shuddering contacts that evoke bodies moving through time and space in disturbing, strange, precarious and beautiful ways.

Bibliography

- Altman, Denis. 1973. *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*. Ringwood: Penguin Books
- Benjamin, Walter. 1992. "Theses on the philosophy of history", in Hannah Arendt (ed) *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*. London: Fontana Press.
- D'Cruz, Carol and Pendleton, Mark. 2013, *After Homosexual: the Legacies of Gay Liberation*, Crawley: UWA Press.
- Leonard, William. "Altman on Halperin: politics versus aesthetics in the constitutions of the male homosexual" *After Homosexual: the Legacies of Gay Liberation*. Ed. Carol D'Cruz and Mark Pendleton. Crawley: UWA Press
- Foucault, Michel, 1994 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' in J. Faubian (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 2* London: Penguin Books.
- Love, Heather. 2009 *Feeling Backwards: Loss And The Politics Of Queer History*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Pendleton, Mark. 2013. "Suspended histories: AIDS and the forgetting of liberation". *After Homosexual: the Legacies of Gay Liberation*. Ed. Carol D'Cruz and Mark Pendleton. Crawley: UWA Press
- Shelley, Martha 1970 "Gay is Good". *After Homosexual: the Legacies of Gay Liberation*. Ed. Carol D'Cruz and Mark Pendleton. Crawley: UWA Press