

Review of *Intimacy, Violence and Activism: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives on Australasian History and Society*, Edited by Graham Willett and Yorick Small. Clayton: Monash University Publishing. 2013. ISBN: 978-1-922235-08-4

JORDY SILVERSTEIN

One of the joys of approaching an archive, particularly an archive of sexuality, is that you don't know what it will contain. But, on top of that, you also don't yet know how its contents will be able to be read. The best experiences of archival encounter are when the sources are rich, engaging, and plentiful. But there are also pleasures to be found for the historian when there is little there, or when the meaning of the archives are uncertain. The joys of archival research – whether the archive comes in the form of a set of personal papers, a collection of photos, or a set of oral histories – are to be found in the work undertaken to comprehend the mysterious lifeworlds of other people.

Chris Brickell, in his work in this collection on photographs of men in pre-World War I New Zealand, captures some of this delight. He shows us, in compelling fashion, the difficulty of reading sources, of knowing what these men were 'doing': with themselves, their bodies, their interactions, their images. Are these erotic photos, he asks? Or are we just willing them to be so. Through Brickell's chapter we gain access to a series of engaging images, whose meanings we can simultaneously grasp and which remains elusive.

Lisa Featherstone reminds us that “In the history of sexuality, there is frequently as much absence in the historical record as there is presence of information” (75). Her chapter shows us how we can find traces, how we can locate histories, within the (homo)sexual archive; and she notes that while there might be much written material available in a wide variety of archives, “What is missing is the intimate: the smell, the touch and the taste of a lover. The divide between the public and the private world is often institutionalised within the archive itself. Perhaps this is what makes the exceptions all the more intriguing” (76).

This murkiness of sources, and the inability to find many sources, recurs throughout this wonderful collection of gay and lesbian histories. Graham Willett and Yorick Smaal have assembled a series of thirteen important short essays which offer readers of Australasian history a glimpse into the richness of histories of connection, community, isolation, criminality, intimacy and activism. Each essay, taken as a standalone piece, offers us a sense of the importance of listening to, and hearing, people’s stories. As a collection, readers are reminded of some of the key themes of modern gay and lesbian history that wend their way throughout individual and communal lives. This edited book traverses the field, exploring the simultaneous lack of sources and tremendous work that many historians have undertaken in bringing histories of homosexuality to light.

Like Featherstone’s call for there to be more written which makes clear the bodily, intimate aspects of histories of sexuality, Sophia Davidson Gluyas issues a clarion call for the depiction of lesbian sex, writing that “We, as lesbians, regularly experience implications that we are not real and that we don’t have real sex... It is important for heterosexuals to understand that we do indeed have sex. I don’t mind if it is a fade-to-black followed by a shot of satisfied-looking women smoking cigarettes [in the film]. It just needs to be clear that lesbians are able to pleasure each other” (99).

We’re reminded of the role of affect, with beautiful depictions from Amanda Kaladelfos of the intimate (and perhaps violent) love that was expressed between some men in late colonial Melbourne. “Don’t be advised by any

one but let it come from your own heart,” wrote Charles Marks to Edward Feeney in 1872. Those depictions of love that saturate archives of the intimate run throughout this collection. Rebecca Jennings draws our attention to the fraught operations of intimacy, love, monogamy and non-monogamy amongst lesbians in 1970s Australian lesbian feminist circles. Across this book, we see the continued invoking of intimate relationships: it could appear, at first, naive glance, that love is a constant. But this is one of the benefits of a collection such as this one: the historical perspective allows readers to understand that while the terms love and intimacy might travel across time and space, what they signify – the kinds of relationships they describe and the words which are used to invoke their presence – change. Affect is historically produced, and how love might be expressed (and what ‘love’ is) amongst gays and lesbians in colonial Australia is in many ways substantially different to how it is expressed in the current queer worlds that Jess Rodgers describes.

As well as intimate emotional lives, we learn in this collection about the histories of bodies. Brickell discusses rugby, and bodies interacting and touching each other through sporting pursuits. Kaladelfos writes about the meaning that doctors made from the (violent use of) bodies of homosexual men – how they read the bodies for signs of homosexuality, and used homosexual men’s rectums as teaching aids in medical school. Smaal explains how police intervened in men’s bodies (or claimed to have intervened) as they had sex in order to determine what precisely was happening. The history of gay and lesbian lives is, of course, the history of embodiment, of different people touching up against one another.

It is also the history of changing relations. Reading these snapshots of other people’s lives reminds us of the multifarious nature of connection, and the different words and understandings which have been used to articulate and understand what being a friend or family member entails. We learn of the messiness of boundaries of different namings of relations, and we are shown that the evasion of heteronormativity has been possible (if a tension-filled endeavour) since its very beginning. These histories demonstrate the vitality

of categories of 'romantic friendships' for men and women, as well as the persistence of stories for which the central punctum is love and intimacy. There are discussions of non-monogamy; of not prioritising the sexual relationship over friendship; and of the tension between political perspectives and emotion, between different people in the relationship wanting different things. New modes of socialisation and representation can also be created, as Jennings shows us with her description of lesbian feminist conferences and sharehouses; Davidson Gluyas demonstrates in her study of 1970s Australian cinema; Petersen displays in a discussion of gay bars and the gay press; Rodgers explores through queer activism; and Scott McKinnon examines in the interactions between gay men and musicals.

But people don't always get to define their lives: homosexual lives in Australasia have been thoroughly criminalised, as numerous chapters show. Through the use of court records (as in John Waugh and Amanda Kaladelfos's chapters), government documentation (as we see in Robert B. French's chapter), and an account of the police (in Smaal's work), we catch a glimpse of the ways that criminalisation has functioned to circumscribe how gays and lesbians can live their lives. These histories demonstrate the ways that the link between homosexuality and criminality has long been enforced.

Through all of these histories, we can access a range of other histories: of photography (Brickell); of crime (Waugh); of the public service, espionage, and employment practices (French); histories of independent media (Petersen); urban history (Willett); and histories of Australian activism (Willett, Shirleene Robinson, Petersen, Jennings, Rodgers).

This is a rich history of activism, which bubbles along relentlessly and creates new communities. Willett shows us how a community in one city can be built through hard work and the formulation of new connections. We learn about the intricacies of interpersonal relations in activist organising within one city – the tensions, the politics, the productive spaces of creating something new. Through her study of ACT UP, Robinson expands our gaze, helping us to

see how these Australasian communities and relationships were part of a larger transnational movement. The collection concludes with a study by Rodgers of the generation which is currently flourishing, building new coalitions, new identities, and new modes of representation.

Through the essays in *Intimacy, Violence and Activism* we attain a grounded understanding of the variety of sources which can exist. We learn of those moments that are barely documented, and those for which there are plentiful sources. These essays provides us with a necessary grounding in recovering and writing stories, and building the foundation stones in creating social histories of gays, lesbians, queers, and all those whose patterns of relationships, identities and intimacies cannot be quite grasped. We can read, as Brickell and Davidson Gluyas suggest, queer histories into spaces where they might not otherwise be seen.

In this collection then we see the development of different categories of identity – on a cursory reading it might appear as though we've moved from slippery to solid, but this would belie the way that the authors tease out the tensions in identity categories and acts: to be someone who identifies as something says nothing much more about them. These are mutable and movable historical categories, encompassing a wide range of behaviours, social practices, and communities. There is tension, and there is love.