

Passing Through Time

An Examination of Trans-Atlantic Queer History

Eliot Blackburn

Passing Through Time: An examination of Trans-Atlantic Queer History

As the wheels of the airplane touched down in Indianapolis I was overwhelmed by the events of the previous two weeks. The Trans-Atlantic Study Abroad traversed two continents, three major cities, and left countless emptied containers of caffeinated beverages in its wake. The Lesbian Herstory Archives was one of the first stops of the trip and provided a powerful framework with which I would experience the next few weeks. After touring the archives Deb Edel engaged me in a conversation about the generational differences between transgender men and butch identified women. She informed me the LHA had quite a collection of “passing folders” that I was welcome to sift through. Within the yellowing file folders stacks of newspaper clippings documenting the lives of female-bodied individuals who had lived as men were arranged neatly from the late 19th century to the interwar years. These newspapers and copies were not just articles; they were obituaries that had appeared in newspapers across the United States. On the table in front of me were the lives these men had created for themselves and each article devalued their existence as men with titles such as “He Was A She!” It occurred to me that even in death the men who had remade themselves were stripped of their identity and their families’ cast aside as if they were victims of a grand fraud. In the lives of these men I found my history. This project attempts to locate the act of passing within a Trans-Atlantic narrative of queer history.¹

One of the challenges in identifying female-bodied individuals who lived as men throughout history is the existence of homosocial or sex segregated spaces. The Lesbian

¹ For the purposes of this project I employ the term “passing” to mean a person or a thing appearing as something other than what normative society has prescribed.

Herstory Archives was at one point in its history a woman only space.² Deb gently reminded this academic that a few decades prior to our visit my personal identity would have precluded my entrance into the space. This observation highlights the ways in which queer politics and identities have shifted over time. If the LHA could change its access policies to be more inclusive of those wishing to know more about lesbians, could it be possible other institutions to do the same thing? Queer history is full of individuals presenting themselves as something other than what heterosexual culture and society expect.

Within queer feminist scholarship the concept of passing is full of political, social, and cultural meanings. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and George Chauncey's *Gay New York* each offer useful conceptualizations of the metaphorical closet queer people have inhabited throughout time.³ Very much in the manner of Judith Butler's performativity work, Sedgwick stresses the notion of the closet as a spectacle.⁴ Sedgwick submits that there are aspects of the closet with the first being the closet as spectacle and the second being the viewpoint of the closet. Chauncey elaborates upon this concept more in *Gay New York* when he constructs the closet in his reader's minds as being made of glass. The person inside the closet can see out into normative society while being contained and on display for the rest of society to police and regulate.⁵ A person's ability to pass, like the closet, is regulated by social and culture norms that seek to erase from history the existence of queerness.

² Edel, Deborah. Interview by author. Personal interview. Brooklyn, New York, June 1, 2014.

³ I use the term queer to signify the relationships and identities of non-heterosexual people.

⁴ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of The Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 222 – 223.

⁵ Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890 - 1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994, 7.

Passing Women and Men

In an edited work compiled by George Chauncey, Martin Duberman, and Martha Vicinus the authors point out since biblical times women have attempted to live their lives as men and have faced severe social stigma.⁶ They go into detail about the various reasons women have passed to achieve personal or political goals. One such site for gender-bending to achieve a desired output was the California Gold Rush of the late nineteenth century. The city of San Francisco expanded from three hundred to thirty thousand people between 1847 and 1850. According to the editors this boom created a “free and easy atmosphere” in the city that facilitated the lives of many women who donned male attire to earn a living and even vote.⁷ Bay Area papers chronicled the lives of the wealthy Lillie Hitchcock Coit (a wealthy individual who frequented night spots in male attire) and Charlie Parkhurst (a Wells Fargo stagecoach driver). The authors situate this group of “passing women” in conversation with to the coverage of Babe Bean and Jeanne Bonnet. While Bean and Bonnet were considered to be deceptive swindlers in the media, Coit and Parkhurst were seen as attempting to navigate a man’s world whilst occupying a man’s wardrobe.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives’ collection of newspapers shows “passing women” were not restricted to just the San Francisco Bay area. In the case of Charlie Howard, the Cincinnati Post reported “Death Reveals Charlie’s Secret “He’s” a Woman.”⁸ The article begins with announcing Howard’s death and with the fifth word – secret – Howard’s life becomes a giant rouse the *Post* dissects and investigates (See Image 1). Although Howard successfully lived his

⁶ Duberman, Martin B., Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey. ““She Even Chewed Tobacco”: A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women In America.” In *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. New York: New American Library, 1989. 183-194.

⁷ *Ibid*, 187.

⁸ *Cincinnati Post*, “Death Reveals Charlie’s Secret,” February 26, 1948.

life passing as male, marrying a woman, and living to be nearly one hundred years old only his gender is addressed at great length. While the article erases the majority of Howard's life, it is still incredibly useful for understanding queer history. In addition to recovering history prior to the Stonewall Rebellion, Howard's obituary provides a possible starting point for exploring the history of gender-non-conforming or transgender history.

The LHA provides ample documentation in support of Duberman, Chauncey, and Vicinus's claim that men and women sought to capitalize economically at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1863 the city of San Francisco passed a law stating, "If any person shall appear in a public place in a state of nudity, or in a dress not belonging to his or her sex...he should be guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction, shall pay a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars."⁹ Armed with the knowledge of Parkhurst, Bean, or Bonnett, San Francisco's obscenity law takes on an entirely different meaning. Passing women disruptive society so much that ordinances were passed in an effort to regulate their attire. Other cities including: Columbus, Ohio, Springfield, Illinois, Memphis, Tennessee, and Lincoln, Nebraska, all had laws that prohibited a person from wearing the opposite sex's clothing by 1890.¹⁰ Obscenity laws and records at the Lesbian Herstory Archive contribute to a broader understanding of queer history within the United States and demand that more research be conducted in order to better recover what has been hidden in plain sight.

For this author the discovery of male identified people living prior to, during, and after the Second World War was a startling one. Such an encounter was made possible with the help of Deb Edel, Joan Nestle, and the Lesbian Herstory Archives. What is important to take away

⁹ Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008, 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

from the LHA and this specific set of records is that gender transgressors exist within queer history and absolutely played a part in shaping the United States into what it is today. The Trans-Atlantic Study Abroad showed me that oftentimes institutions tasked with the mission of preserving history omit facts about their artists' lives. At three of the more famous museums visited, overt links to queer history and or community were expunged.

In Plain Sites – (Re)claiming queer moments

In an attempt to make works more palatable to the masses, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City created spaces that tried to pass artist's work off as more heteronormative than it actually was. The most glaring example of forced passing at MoMA occurs on the fourth floor in the Painting and Sculpture Gallery (See Images 2 and 3). In this gallery the work of Jasper John and Robert Rauschenberg hang within twenty feet of each other without a single mention of the relationship between the two artists and their work.¹¹ Rauschenberg is widely known as being romantically connected to Jasper Johns and his work is nearly out of context without recognition of his alleged homosexuality.

Jonathan Katz urges less outrage and shock over the ignoring of Rauschenberg and Johns' relationship. He writes, "at once present and absent, telling and not telling - should not strike us as unusual. Indeed, it's been named in ordinary language; we call it the closet."¹² Constructing Rauschenberg's silence as a closet is useful in order to understand his actions at the time but what MoMA has done is to ignore a central fact that influenced the artist's work. Katz points out that while being closeted during the 1950s may have been a survival mechanism, it also created a

¹¹ "Robert Rauschenberg." Museum of Modern Art.
http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A4823&page_number=6&template_id=1&sort_order=1 (accessed June 7, 2014).

¹² Katz, Johnathan. "Lovers and Divers."
<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html> (accessed June 25, 2014).

person that was “conscious of that doubleness, that pull, the doubled vision that is the inheritance of all who exist in two worlds.”¹³ The fourth floor sculpture and painting gallery at the Museum of Modern Art exists within those two worlds. In MoMA’s world Rauschenberg and Johns had similar styles and created works around the same time thus qualifying them to display near each other. In the educated mind of a queer or enlightened individual, it is entirely fitting that two men who were unable to live their lives publicly should have their work displayed together for all the world to see.

Queer artists, themes, and histories did not fair much better once crossing the Atlantic. In the Dutch national museum, the Rijksmuseum, queer themes were again evident if one reads between the lines. The first statue one encounters after clearing the ticket scanners depicts an adult male resting his hand on a young boy’s shoulder (See Image 4). Even though both men are nude and neither is posed in an overtly sexual manner it would be easy to dismiss the statue as another blasé sculpture. A contemporary, queer reading of the statue recognizes the symbolism present in the representation of intergenerational male interaction. The statue is called *Bacchus and Ampelos* and depicts the God of Wine (Bacchus) and his satyr (Ampelos). According to Greek legend Bacchus fell madly in love with Ampelos and after a tragic accident the young Ampelos died. Upon Ampelos’s death, Bacchus turned him into a vine and made wine from his blood.¹⁴ None of this information is present at the Rijksmuseum. In order to simply find the name of the statue for this project the work had to be identified by markings left by the sculptor on the base of the pedestal (See Image 5).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ "Bacchus and Ampelos - Franciscus Righetti, 1782." Rijksmuseum.
<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objecten?q=franciscus+righetti&p=1&ps=12&ii=3#/BK-2006-8,3>
 (accessed June 24, 2014).

Bacchus and Ampelos is an expression of homosocial interaction during antiquity that David Halperin cautions contemporary historians from identifying with “sexuality.” Halperin contends sexuality is a modern production and that sex acts should not be seen as reflective of a person’s sexuality.¹⁵ Righetti’s *Bacchus and Ampelos* does not explicitly depict penetrative sex acts that Halperin says define power dynamics between free male citizens and young boys but it arguably does depict and interpretation of such a relationship. Ampelos is tucked under Bacchus arm and both are looking in the other in the eye. Their gazes are steadfast on each other while everything from the shoulders down on both figures indicates forward motion. With added context it is easy to picture Bacchus and Ampelos strolling through the ancient world. An interesting element of their story is that it was not the physical sex act but the emotional connection Bacchus develops for Ampelos that he must suffer the loss of upon the latter’s death.

Considering the importance of religious practice and transformation within the Netherlands, perhaps the presentation of Bacchus and Ampelos should not be all that shocking. In relation to homosexuality, Christianity has had an enormous influence on Dutch social policy. Between 1900 and 1970 the Netherlands experienced three shifts or waves of understanding and approaching homosexuality.¹⁶ While each shift became progressively more accepting of homosexuality in general, the changing attitudes were largely due to the changing relations between religion and medical/mental health care more broadly. As the Dutch government began to take on more social welfare programs it became increasingly more difficult for it to maintain strong religious ties.

¹⁵ Abelow, Henry, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. "Is There A History of Sexuality." In *The Lesbian and gay studies reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993, 417.

¹⁶ Oosterhuis, Harry. "Christian Social Policy and Homosexuality in The Netherlands." *Journal of Homosexuality* 32, no. 1 (2008): 95-112.

Oosterhuis submits the 1930s and 40s produced a mixed discourse surrounding “real homosexuality” (men who were born homosexual) or “pseudo-homosexual (perverse behavior of normal men).¹⁷ Women were not included in the conversation surrounding homosexuality but they were also not necessarily excluded. What is intriguing about this shift in social policy is that it coincides with the occupation of the Netherlands and World War II. Across town from the Rijksmuseum stands the Verzetsmuseum (Dutch Resistance Museum) that displays some of the ways the Dutch resisted their occupation. At the entrance to the museum are representations of the pillarization of society: Protestant, Catholic, Socialist, and Other. Each pillar was (and to some extent still are) separate from the rest and responsible for the education of their children, formed and participated in social groups, and at times worked within their religious or political spheres of association.¹⁸ After the war the pillarization of Dutch society starts to erode but understanding each pillars and their social organization is necessary in order to fully understand how the Resistance museum presents the experience of World War II.

Thousands of Jews and their families were hidden across the Netherlands and the city of Amsterdam. Perhaps the most famous of these is Anne Frank and her family who hid in a secret apartment annex for over two years.¹⁹ The Resistance museum does not specifically single out the Frank family, as their story and secret annex are memorialized with a separate museum space. The act of passing became very important for Jews during the war, especially in Amsterdam. Because the city was occupied and held for a multitude of years, people had to figure out ways to survive. One such story is that of Frieda Belinfante, a lesbian who participated in the Dutch

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 102.

¹⁸ Foray, Jennifer. "Dutch History and Amsterdam Knowledge." Class lecture, Trans-Atlantic LGBTQ Study Abroad from Purdue University, West Lafayette, May 22, 2014.

¹⁹ "The story of Anne Frank: Hiding in the secret annex." Anne Frank House. <http://www.annefrank.org/en/Anne-Frank/Not-outside-for-2-years/> (accessed May 27, 2014).

Resistance by forging legal documents and bombing a government records building. Although Belinfante was not mentioned in the displays at the Dutch Resistance museum as of June 2014, she has been featured before. In the documentary *But I Was A Girl* Belinfante recounts her time in the resistance and dressing (read passing) as a man in order to survive.²⁰ It is unfortunate Belinfante's contribution to the Dutch Resistance is not more recognized as the building her group bombed saved thousands of lives and stood across the street from where the Dutch Resistance Museum stands today.

In a slightly less harrowing and emotionally taxing setting, the Study Abroad group experienced the Louvre Museum soon after touring the Dutch Resistance Museum. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully recount the ways in which queer history was or was not displayed in the Louvre. What is possible is to address one of the more famous paintings in the Louvre's collection for having homoerotic themes, Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters. According to the Louvre's description of the work the painting was produced anonymously to mark the pregnancy of Gabrielle, one of King Henry IV of France. The overt touching of Gabrielle's breast by another woman (purportedly her sister) is the most forward thing happening in the painting. What makes the painting particularly interesting is the experience museumgoers have with it.

While sitting on a bench near the painting I overheard and witnessed a wide variety of reactions from people. Some glanced at the painting then quickly walked away, others pointed and giggled, and luckily for this academic a few conversed in English about what they thought the painting represented. One woman was convinced it depicted an odd medical procedure while

²⁰ *But I Was A Girl: The Story of Freida Belinfante*. Film. Directed by Toni Boumans. New York: First Run/Icarus Films, 1998.

the other refused to believe these women were sisters, implying they were probably lesbians but “they couldn’t say that back then.” Whether or not the artist intended for the painting to be part of Trans-Atlantic queer history or not, the very fact that it is questioned to have homosexual connotations and context qualify it for consideration

Gabrielle d’Estrées was not the only woman with royal ties to be publicly depicted in various stages of undress with other women. During the French Revolution Marie-Antionette was depicted as a tribade, accused her of incest, and adultery.²¹ The strangest thing about the Queen’s treatment in the anonymous press is that they are still studied as a point of fascination today. Elizabeth Colwill’s contends historians should study these images as they hold a wealth of information in terms of understanding how “Revolutionary pornography” changed the sexual politics of the Revolution. Images of Marie Antoinette engaging in sex acts with another woman or multiple other people complicate the ability for LGBTQ scholars to include her specifically as a prominent figure in lesbian history.

Colwill pulls her chapter title “pass as a woman, act like a man” from her description of the types of behaviors Marie Antoinette is depicted engaging.²² Here passing is used to describe the sex act as being the dominant (or penetrator in the language of David Halperin) party in the act. Because Antoinette is seen controlling each situation she is in, Colwill associates her power with masculinity that furthers Halperin’s position that same-sex acts can symbolize power and authority. This depicted authority was created and rejected by the French public, as she was “tried and roundly convicted in the press as a tribade.”²³ Colwill’s work is part of Trans-Atlantic

²¹ Merrick, Jeffrey, and Elizabeth Colwill. "Pass as a Woman, Act like a Man." In *Homosexuality In Modern France*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 54-79.

²² *Ibid*, 58.

²³ *Ibid*, 59.

queer history because it addresses the creation of and fallout from being seen as a person with same-sex desires.

“A body under AIDs”

The final aspect of passing that arched across the United States and Atlantic Ocean was the desire to pass as healthy and/or HIV-. This observation is not meant to imply that a person necessarily desires to be perceived as HIV+ or unhealthy. My observation here is simply to offer an analytical framework with which to think about bodies and health in a post HIV/AIDs epidemic society. In *Posthuman Bodies* Jack Halberstam refers to the human body as ““a technology, a screen, a projected image; it is a body under the sign of AIDs...contaminated, deadly, and techno-body.”²⁴ Halberstam’s work is the most recent in a lineage of gender and sexuality scholars that include Butler, Rich, and Foucault. As the study abroad cohort worked with ACT UP New York and ACT UP Paris, the phrase posthuman, techno-body would not rid itself from my psyche.

In the film *How To Survive A Plague* a clip of an interview with AIDs Activist and ACT UP member Bob Rafsky is featured roughly thirty minutes into the film. Rafsky argued HIV positive people should not be ignored in the United States because “*a decent society does not put people out to pasture and let them die because they’ve done a human thing.*” The human thing with which Rafsky is referring is the act of having sex. On national television Rafsky urged societal and governmental action simply on the basis of simple humanity regardless of sexual preference. The interview’s inclusion into *How To Survive A Plague* provides insight into ACT UP’s strategy of the 1990s and the urgency with which activists made their case to the media.

²⁴ Halberstam, Judith, and Ira Livingston. "Sign Posts: Some Posthuman Narratives." *Posthuman Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. 2-4.

This urgency lives on today in the work of original ACT UP members Jim Eigo and Tim Lunceford. While in New York City, Eigo and Lunceford included the study abroad cohort in ACT UP's renewed efforts to fight the HIV/AIDs epidemic.

With infection rights of 50,000 more positive people every year, ACT UP has encouraged the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to revise and update policies regarding treatment, education, and prevention of HIV. The most polarizing topic of the renewed fight against HIV surrounds the medication Truvada and the drug manufacturer, Gilead. Advances in medicine and technology have made it possible to treat HIV exposure or almost completely prevent its contraction with Truvada. This advancement has sparked a very large debate amongst the gay male and men who have sex with men (msm) communities. Larry Kramer, author of *The Normal Heart* and longtime gay rights advocate has publically condemned those who take Truvada as a form of HIV prevention cowards.²⁵ He justifies labeling these men as cowards because he sees it as a way to avoid practicing safe sex and wearing a condom. Kramer sites using a condom for sexual intimacy as a political act and those who do not engage that political act are cowards because they would rather "poison their bodies" than take a political stand.

Wearing a condom is a political stand because it protects the human body, the frail and fragile body, from disease. A virus that eliminated a generation of gay men forced the most intimate of human interactions out into the public sphere. The human body's existence in the wake of HIV and AIDs can no longer be contained by glass closets and gendered garb. The posthuman body is a collection of private and public moments that have covered and uncovered themselves across the history of time. Halberstam's assertion that the body under AIDs is a

²⁵ "Truvada Is For "Cowards," Says "The Normal Heart" Playwright Larry Kramer." Queerty. <http://www.queerty.com/truvada-is-for-cowards-says-the-normal-heart-playwright-larry-kramer-20140521> (accessed May 22, 2014).

technobody should be taken seriously as inventions such as Truvada are now a reality. What medication can prevent today marked gay and msm bodies for decades and now with the help of external actors the body can pass as unmarked.

Although science and technology have created the potential to live free of being physically marked with AIDs, those who experience AIDs have left their mark on history. The lives of non-heterosexual, same-sex loving, gender non-conforming, HIV+, polyamorous, individuals is recorded somewhere in the registers of history. Over the course of a few short weeks the Trans-Atlantic Study Abroad explored three cities, countless identities, and bared witness to some of the bleakest and triumph moments the world has experienced. As queer people and communities move forward into the twenty-first century we should look down at our feet and examine the road that has been laid for us by those who disobeyed, sipped in, rebelled, ACTed UP, and died for our right to shatter our own glass closets whenever we want. What this course has taught me is that people similar and not so similar to me have created the world in which I live in today, for better or worse, and my history is much broader than I thought possible.

Bibliography

- Abelove, Henry, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. "Is There A History of Sexuality." In *The Lesbian and gay studies reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- "Bacchus and Ampelos - Franciscus Righetti, 1782." Rijksmuseum.
<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objecten?q=franciscus+righetti&p=1&ps=12&ii=3#/BK-2006-8,3> (accessed June 24, 2014).
- Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890 - 1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- But I Was A Girl: The Story of Freida Belinfante*. Film. Directed by Toni Boumans. New York: First Run/Icarus Films, 1998.
- Cincinnati Post*, "Death Reveals Charlie's Secret," February 26, 1948.
- Duberman, Martin B., Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey. "'She Even Chewed Tobacco': A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women In America." In *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. New York: New American Library, 1989. 183-194.
- Edel, Deborah. Interview by author. Personal interview. Brooklyn, New York, June 1, 2014.
- Foray, Jennifer. "Dutch History and Amsterdam Knowledge." Class lecture, Trans-Atlantic LGBTQ Study Abroad from Purdue University, West Lafayette, May 22, 2014.
- Halberstam, Judith, and Ira Livingston. "Sign Posts: Some Posthuman Narratives." *Posthuman Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. 2-4.
- Katz, Johnathan. "Lovers and Divers."
<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html> (accessed June 25, 2014).
- Merrick, Jeffrey, and Elizabeth Colwill. "Pass as a Woman, Act like a Man." In *Homosexuality In Modern France*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 54-79.
- Oosterhuis, Harry. "Christian Social Policy and Homosexuality in The Netherlands." *Journal of Homosexuality* 32, no. 1 (2008): 95-112.
- "Robert Rauschenberg." Museum of Modern Art.
http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A4823&page_number=6&template_id=1&sort_order=1 (accessed June 7, 2014).
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of The Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008.
- "The story of Anne Frank: Hiding in the secret annex." Anne Frank House.
<http://www.annefrank.org/en/Anne-Frank/Not-outside-for-2-years/> (accessed May 27, 2014).
- "Truvada Is For 'Cowards,' Says 'The Normal Heart' Playwright Larry Kramer." Queerty.
<http://www.queerty.com/truvada-is-for-cowards-says-the-normal-heart-playwright-larry-kramer-20140521> (accessed May 22, 2014).