

## INTRODUCTION: 'A GREAT UNRECORDED HISTORY'

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Please do not make me use the word homosexual, which I think too dangerous (for it enhances prejudices) and absurd. Say 'Gay' if you like, but it would be too recent a word to be used in this passage.

Marguerite Yourcenar, 1987

### WORDS AND LABELS

It was quite hard to choose the title of this small book, but then words and identities are almost always difficult things. In the end, we went with 'gay', although it is a very modern term for identifying a person, and it is often taken to refer to men, rather than to both men and women. It is, however, a convenient and widely understood shorthand, like most of our terms for living, and the alternative labels seemed more problematic. 'Queer' is a reclaimed term of abuse which might sound too politically charged for some readers. 'Homosexual' is a term coined in the nineteenth century as part of the medicalization of human sexuality, and it can sound as if it is reducing people to scientific curiosities. These difficulties about the seemingly simple matter of a book's title hint at the different cultural values that have been placed on the apparently universal phenomenon that this book explores: people who tend to desire and love other people of the same sex.

The long stretch of world history increases the complexity. The Roman emperor Hadrian (AD 76–138) was not 'gay' in the modern senses of the word, but from what we know of his loves



Two Roman lovers, a detail from the  
'Warren Cup'. Palestine, c. AD 10.  
Silver, H. (bowl of cup) 8.3 cm.

it seems certain that he would have been 'gay' or 'bisexual' if he had lived in modern Europe. So we avoid using the word 'gay' for ancient societies, and refer to 'same-sex desire' which has fewer exclusively modern overtones. But this raises the question: is what we now term 'homosexuality' a modern concept or is it something that has always existed in different forms and names? Same-sex desire certainly seems to have been part of human experience from the earliest recorded times. In a poem from ancient Egypt, around 1800 BC, one male god tries to seduce another by saying 'What a lovely backside you have!' This is perhaps the earliest known chat-up line in human history, and it is between two men. So same-sex desire is not a recent invention, and evidence from so many cultures shows that it has not been 'imported' from one culture to others, as some people have claimed. But still the question remains: has such desire always been something that defines a person's identity, as it often has in the modern period?

Desire leaves no archaeological traces. 'Love' is always hard to pin down. It is sometimes difficult to fix precise boundaries to these feelings in our own lives, so it is not surprising that it is even harder with individuals from four thousand years ago. And such problems are not specific to *ancient* history. Trying to sense how similar and how different the past is to us is a fundamental part of the historical exercise. As David Halperin has noted, studying sexuality raises fundamental questions about identity and difference in writing history. The aim of this short book is not to outline any single answer to these complex questions, or to assert that certain attitudes are right or wrong. It is simply to present a few historical facts as we see them, and to remind all readers (regardless of their own desires) that love has always been diverse throughout history and across cultures. History has all too often been a list of the deeds of famous men

who are implicitly 'heterosexual' and usually European. This approach has been very limiting, not least to women. Likewise, 'love' and 'romance' in many cultures are often portrayed as 'heterosexual' by default. This is also limiting, and can be dull for readers and viewers, unless they happen to belong to that category. Unsurprisingly, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have often felt excluded and silenced, and without a history. But this is simply not so: no one from these communities should feel alone in the world. As E. M. Forster noted 'there always have been people like me and there always will be'. So a more inclusive and interesting history of the world is possible, and same-sex desire does have a history – and in many forms.

## FORMED BY CULTURE

How then do we find this love in the historical record? The difficulties seem immense. What different societies consider to be 'abnormal' or 'normal' has varied widely. Many types of sexual relations can go against the concerns for property and breeding that underlie the social norms in many (if not all) cultures, and so sex often runs the risk of disapproval and censure. In particular, some religions have regarded same-sex sexual activity as immoral, because it is thought to be against procreation and therefore 'unnatural'. Human societies have frequently been built around factors such as power, wealth and inheritance, and have often produced simple distinctions to categorize and control their members' desires.

Looking at a range of societies across time makes it clear that the realities of existence are actually more complex and contingent than this when it comes to both gender and desire. Many societies have created distinct and exclusive roles for men and women. The two genders often have supposedly inherent

characteristics, as can be seen in ancient Egyptian art where men and women were given different skin tones as well as different physiques. But such fixed definitions are not invariably the case. In many cultures the gods often have both male and female attributes, raising the possibility that people also need not be viewed as rigidly male or female. Many cultures have articulated the existence of intermediate sexes, 'third' sexes and 'hermaphrodites', combining both sexes in one. Gender, like desire, is diverse and has been shaped and constructed in many different ways.

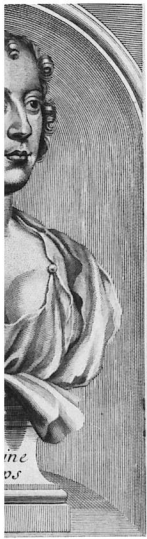
Even what is thought of as erotic or sexual can vary from culture to culture. In this sense, any male erection is a cultural creation: the same depiction can be, at various times and places, either a state-sanctioned piece of religious iconography or a bit of pornography for private viewing (see pp. 42–3). Carvings on some street corners in Roman cities, for example, show erections or even whole animals made up of erect phalluses (a 'phallus' is simply an academic penis). An erection was often a magical symbol or talisman against the evil eye in Mediterranean cultures, and these carvings are almost certainly protective devices to ward off evil from the building or road (opposite). But modern visitors often mis-read these inscriptions as signs for brothels, advertising sex for sale. Roman culture is comparatively recent, familiar and well documented; such embarrassing mistakes are even easier to make when thinking about more distant cultures. And when the evidence comes from wordless objects and is purely visual, it can be particularly hard to interpret. In Sicily, there are very early rock engravings from around 10,000 BC in the Grotta dell'Addaura which show two naked men lying close together, as part of a larger scene. Some historians have suggested that they show man on man sexual activity; if so, this would be the earliest known representation.

A carving of a phallic animal at a street corner in the Roman city of Leptis Magna in modern Libya, from around AD 200.



However, this is disputed by specialists, and other possible interpretations include acrobats, initiation ceremonies or (perhaps the most likely) ritual killings. It is impossible to have an infallible instinctive 'gaydar' across other cultures and periods, and the historian of desire has to proceed with some caution.

Close intimate relationships between two men or two women are not always sexual: they can be 'homosocial' rather than 'homosexual'. When two men kiss in some cultures, this can suggest a sexual aspect to their relationship, but this would not be the case in other cultures. And this uncertainty is nothing new. Homer's epic poem the *Iliad*, from around the eighth century BC, has at its centre the passionate relationship between the Greek warrior heroes Patroclus and Achilles. Different interpretations of the exact nature of this relationship existed among readers even in ancient times. The dividing line between friendship and love can be notoriously unstable. This has also been the case with some historical friendships between women, including – from a very different period – the married



Englishwoman Katherine Philips (1631–64) (left). She wrote verse in praise of her relationships with women, and her passions now seem to many modern readers to exceed the norms of romantic friendship:

Thus our twin-Souls in one shall grow,  
And teach the World new Love,  
Redeem the Age and Sex, and shew  
A Flame Fate dares not move.

As her editor innocently commented in 1667, ‘we might well have call’d her the English *Sappho*’ (see pp. 44–5). We might well. But where do we draw the line between all these different types of love? And do we have to?

These uncertainties show how impossible it is to impose absolute categorizations, and they also show the diverse forms that love and affection can take. Sexual acts and roles also vary, but these too have often been shaped by societies in rigidly distinct and mutually exclusive ways. Women’s desire has sometimes even been assumed not to exist at all, still less been valued and articulated. Women and their lives have often left little evidence in early history compared to the men in power, as will be obvious from the images in this book, which are mostly male. Like all social relationships, love and desire are often bound up with power, status and age. In particular, being a ‘real man’ has often been viewed as having an exclusively dominant role in all social activities, which means that many cultures have conceived man on man sex in terms of strongly gendered roles. For the ‘active’ partner, such sex acts did not involve any divergence from acceptable masculine activity and identity, while the ‘passive’ partner was thought to be taking on the role of a woman and so was breaking the norms. Actions

are, of course, not necessarily the same as identity. After all, who is more ‘gay’, the man who has sex with another man because there is no woman available, or a man who wants to have sex with other men but doesn’t because he has a wife? Identities are never simple.

In many societies, sexual acts between men can occur as part of social rituals, such as initiation ceremonies marking the passage from adolescence to adulthood, and so they are often structured by age. Same-sex love has also been presented in more egalitarian terms of comradeship and devotion, as in the Chinese phrase ‘the passion of the cut sleeve’, recalling a romantic incident in the imperial court. Chinese historians relate that in the Han dynasty, the emperor Ai (ruled 27–1 BC) ‘did not care for women’. He loved the married Dong Xian, and bestowed great favours on him as his sexual favourite. In one official history of the period, the writer Ban Gu relates how

emperor Ai was sleeping in the daytime with Dong Xian stretched out across his sleeve. When the emperor wanted to get up, Dong Xian was still asleep. Because he did not want to disturb him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve and got up. His love and thoughtfulness went this far.

After a failed attempt by the emperor on his death bed to appoint him as his successor, Dong Xian was forced to commit suicide and the Han dynasty ended. But it is said that the incident inspired courtiers to remove their own sleeves, and ‘the passion of the cut sleeve’ became a way of describing male-male love in Chinese culture. And note that Dong Xian was married. In some societies same-sex desire between men or women has been accepted as long as it did not prevent them from fulfilling the social roles of marrying and having

children. It was tolerated but not regarded as a cultural norm or ideal.

Among all this variety, one episode has had notable consequences. Same-sex sexual relationships were prohibited in the Jewish Bible, which tells how God destroyed the wicked city of Sodom with fire after its inhabitants tried to ‘know’ (an ambiguous word) the angels whom he had sent to visit a virtuous man named Lot. The episode also occurs in the Qur’an. The sins of Sodom were apparently many, but religious tradition has often focused on the same-sex activity that is thought to have been involved, and God’s punishment has often been used to justify the persecution of people termed ‘sodomites’. The spread of empires has meant that the impact of this interpretation of the tale has been almost worldwide. Often this persecution was part of the political agendas when (Christian) governments colonized other cultures, such as those of South America (see pp. 62–3), although not all Christian religious traditions have been so hostile. The historian John Boswell even claimed that marriage rites between men existed in the early Church, although this has been much disputed.

Past societies equal ours in their self-awareness and complexity, and same-sex desire has often found a means of expression without the modern roles or terms that we would use. The (now standard) terminology of ‘homosexual’ and ‘lesbian’ was developed by academics only late in the nineteenth century, and yet individuals’ stories show that an awareness of distinctive desires existed well before this. For example, the upper-class Yorkshire woman Anne Lister (1791–1840) (opposite) wrote parts of her extensive diaries in a secret code. These were only published in the 1980s, and in them she shows that she was fully aware that men’s admiration was:



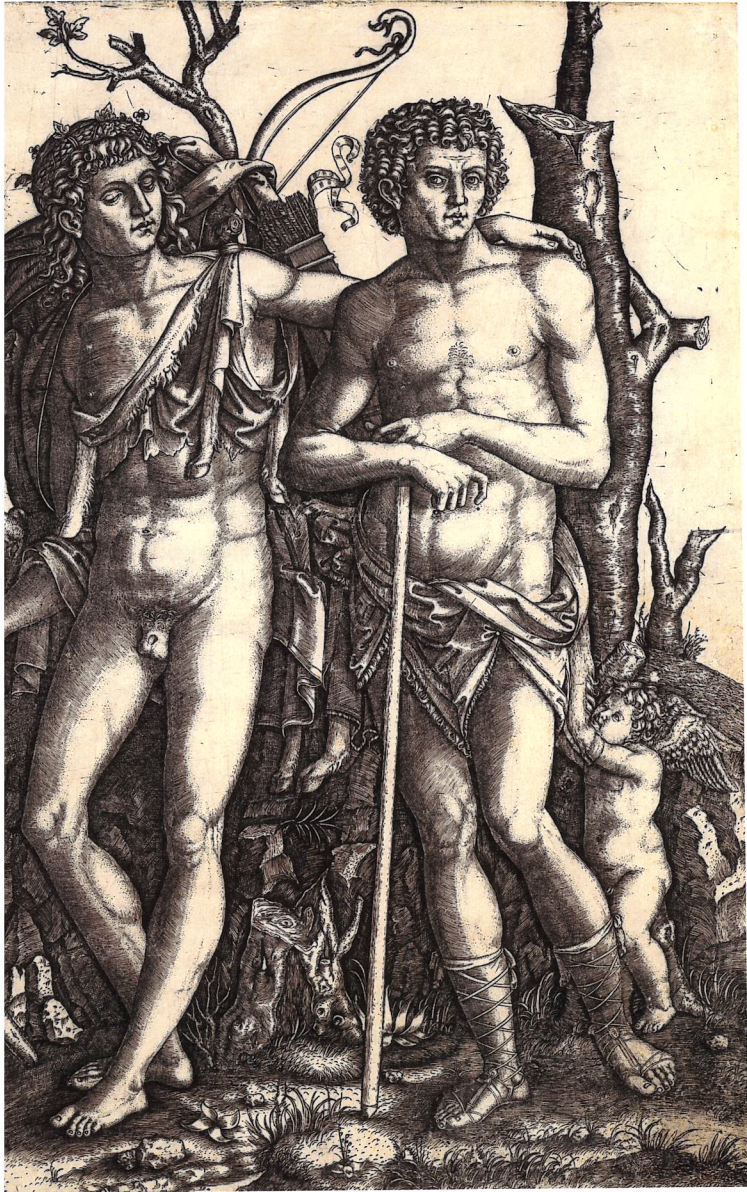
A portrait of Anne Lister by the Yorkshire artist Joshua Horner, from around 1830.

Oil on canvas, 74 x 61 cm.

not meet for me. I love, & only love, the fairer sex & thus beloved by them in turn, my heart revolts from any other love but theirs.

Her masculine appearance and behaviour led her to be mocked as ‘Gentleman Jack’ by locals, and her affairs with long-term (female) lovers had to be conducted discreetly to avoid public disgrace. Her ability to live her own socially visible life like this was of course only possible because of her comparative wealth and social standing. Her diaries show that desire does not need modern academic terminology in order to exist, and other cultures and periods provide further examples. For instance, the Indian *Kamasutra*, from the fourth century AD, categorizes men who desire other men as having a ‘third nature’. In addition, the invisible unrecorded lives of most of the populations of the past may have been more varied than we imagine. Before we label people, we need to understand their cultural world in all its difference and possibilities. As the poet W. H. Auden (1907–73) put it in 1939, more perceptively and concisely than many academics:

Slowly we are learning,  
We at least know this much,  
That we have to unlearn  
    Much that we were taught,  
And are growing chary  
Of emphatic dogmas;  
Love like Matter is much  
    Odder than we thought.



An engraving by the Italian artist Marcantonio Raimondi, showing Apollo and Hyacinthus. Italy, c. 1510–27.

Paper, 30 x 22.5 cm.

## CHANGING ATTITUDES

Attitudes have always varied. Looking through possible historical evidence, different contexts clearly have different rules in every culture. Works of art, for example, will give us a rather different view of the world from legal codes of the same period. An engraving by the Italian artist Marcantonio Raimondi from the early sixteenth century shows the Greek god Apollo with his beloved Hyacinthus (opposite). This was produced in an age when men could be killed for acting on the desires that the print of the affectionate couple evokes and celebrates. As the literary historian Bruce Smith asks, what are we to make of a culture that could produce both such a print and such death sentences? In looking for love in history, we need to remember that art is never simply a reflection of social reality. Much ancient Greek art, both domestic and public, displayed naked male beauty as an image of physical, social and intellectual perfection, even though public male nudity was not common except in athletics grounds. In this case, however, we can be fairly sure that such art had an erotic aspect for the intended (male) viewers. In one of Plato's dialogues from around 390 BC (but set in 432 BC), the philosopher Socrates watches the young aristocrat Charmides, aged around eighteen and judged to be the most handsome Athenian of the moment, as he enters a wrestling school. He is surrounded by admiring men and youths, and 'every one of them looked at him *as if he were a statue*'. Socrates is quick to invite the sexy young man to sit down beside him, but only (he says) so that he can see if his soul is as beautiful and noble as his physique.

It is hard to assess actual lived experiences even from legal records, since laws present a rather simplified view of society and, like Anne Lister, the wealthy could always get away with much that was contrary to how they were supposed to behave.

In many societies, openness or indiscretion about sexual habits could perhaps cause more outrage than the sex act itself. When one English gentleman was arrested in the 1840s a friend exclaimed ‘Gibson Craig ... told me that W[illiam] Bankes had been again caught with a soldier!!! Monstrous madness’. The shock was not so much that he had been with a man, but that he had been caught – and not for the first time (see pp. 82–3). This reaction could turn into panic if the scandal risked implicating the Establishment. The middle-class cross-dressers Ernest Boulton (born 1848) and Frederick Park (born 1847) – known about London as Stella and Fanny – were arrested on 28 April 1870. There was great newspaper coverage and public interest, particularly because one of their partners was a member of the nobility. But then suddenly the press went very quiet. The official reaction to this case involved a double hypocrisy, as the novelist Barbara Ewing notes:

the hypocrisy of pretending that such sexual practices did not exist (except perhaps among the lower echelons of society) and a further self-seeking hypocrisy: simultaneously working behind the scenes to make sure that some aspects of the case never became public knowledge.

As is clear from such scandals, distinct sub-cultures based on same-sex activities had (unsurprisingly) developed in many societies where there was no significant cultural recognition for same-sex desire or gender diversity. In Europe, these underground cultures probably began from late antiquity onwards. But since these were *sub*-cultures, they are often now difficult to trace. Ironically they are frequently known only from the records created by the very institutions that were attempting to suppress them, and which of course do not

An illustrated ballad, *This is Not the Thing or Molly Exalted*, showing a 60-year-old man being abused in the pillory. Spectators shout ‘Flogg him’, ‘Cut it off’. London, 1762.

Paper, 12.8 x 17 cm.



present an unbiased picture. Human society in general, it seems, is very conventional in its attitudes. Sometimes, where ‘heterosexual’ alliances have been the normal and preferred mode of desire, anything that is less than ‘ideal’ has been suppressed from the record by governments and religious elites, and even where possible from society itself. Societies have often shown little tolerance of diversity, as is seen in the violent and hostile treatment of effeminate men, known as ‘Mollies’, in one English broadsheet ballad of 1762 (above):

Ye Reversers of Nature, each *dear* little Creature,  
Of soft and effeminate sight,  
See above what your fate is, and 'ere it too late is,  
Oh, learn to be – all in the *Right*.

English society here enforces its ideas of what is ‘natural’ and ‘right’ in a brutal way, ignoring the fact that some other societies

have viewed same-sex desire as both natural *and* right.

The laws in Christian Europe were based on values derived from the Bible, but they were not above change. With trade and empire, the West encountered different cultures that indicated that its attitudes towards any sort of sexuality were neither universal nor inevitable. Travellers and historians often viewed sexually explicit objects from other cultures with surprise. New discoveries from the supposedly respectable classical world, such as the Roman city of Pompeii, added to their shock. History showed that same-sex desire did not always necessarily mean anti-social depravity, and the love that had been considered to be 'unspeakable' started to request the right not to be persecuted. After generations of protests and campaigns, attitudes have now changed in many places. In 2011, the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, stated simply that 'gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights'. This change has, however, not always been smooth or easy. Periods of economic hardship or of disease have often made people look

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for scapegoats, and foreigners or anyone 'abnormal' and 'different' are always convenient candidates, as during the economic crisis before the Second World War. This vicious tendency of the human animal persists today. In this respect, 'gay' history is very much part of humanity's wider history.

Even in modern times, many people have kept silent about their desires and have not identified themselves in terms of their sexuality. The 'closet' (an image of living secretly) has been hard to escape from. The liberation that has been achieved in many societies over the past century should not be undervalued or taken for granted. In 1963, when I was born, this book could not have been written, and I could not have lived openly with my partner. Even in 2013, this book could not be published in some places: 'homosexuality' is still illegal in around seventy-eight countries across the world, and a death penalty is still applied in five of them. Full legal equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is still very rare, and protests and campaigns for their rights continue. The issue of equal marriage rights in the 2010s is just one specific example of this wider struggle (opposite). As with women's rights, change has nevertheless gathered momentum. Medical advances have even opened up options for transgendered people that were undreamt of a few generations ago. Some parts of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities have embraced sexualized identities, very much defined by their sexual preferences, while others embrace identities defined by more domestic concerns and seek assimilation into society. Some want equality and integration, others equality and distinctiveness. Now, many cultures are more ready to recognize that desire can take different forms. For example, the San Francisco novels of Armistead Maupin celebrate a new sort of family and the idea of a person's 'significant other ... your

spouse and/or lover and/or best buddy'. In many cultures, there are now gay characters in soap operas, gay government ministers, gay historical romances, celebrities who are as open about their gay or pan-sexuality as any 'straight' celebrity, and straight sportsmen who are happy to be gay pin-ups. 'LGBT' people are increasingly visible in increasingly diverse roles. So much so that we may be entering a 'post-gay' age in which sexuality can be an integral part of anyone's identity but need not be contested by anyone else. One day, perhaps everyone will be equal in 'Love, the Beloved Republic'.

### 'QUEERING' HISTORY

In the 1940s, a famous report on male sexuality by the zoologist Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956) argued that human sexuality was a continuum. He claimed from his sample that ten per cent of the American males surveyed were more or less exclusively 'homosexual' for at least three years between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five. This percentage has been disputed but, regardless of the issues of accuracy or the fact that the sample comes from a single society, this small figure shows why some people regard 'homosexual' experiences as just a 'minority' issue. This view ignores the argument that *all* human sexuality is a continuum, of course, and even this ten per cent seems to represent a rather significant minority, much larger than many people often imagine. And the same is arguably true of the historical past.

Early lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender histories that were written in the twentieth century often provided a series of positive role models as ancestors for modern 'gay' identity. This type of history is still very powerful, and such famous names often include, as random examples, Alexander the Great,

Socrates, Vergil, Richard the Lion Heart, Leonardo da Vinci, James I, Queen Christina, Frederick the Great, Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alan Turing, Marlene Dietrich and Roland Barthes. The 'gay' side of these famous historical figures was usually not mentioned in official accounts, and these studies performed an important function of regaining a history for people who often felt ignored and suppressed by silence. As a character in Larry Kramer's 1985 play *The Normal Heart* says defiantly, 'I belong to a culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato ...'. Many LGBT people first realize their own sexuality in a moment of recognition that has been inspired by accounts of literary or historical figures – a realization that their feelings are not unique. This process of 'coming out' to oneself and to society has perhaps made it appealing for historians to try to do the same to historical figures and to 'out' them as ancestors and role models. But simply saying such figures are 'gay' underplays the difference of the past, and many scholars feel that it imposes our own modern terminologies and identities a little too freely. But, of course, these figures were certainly not 'heterosexual' either.

In reaction, there has been a movement towards 'queer' history: writing history for those people who are normally excluded (or at least partly suppressed) from the official accounts of the world, and so undermining cultural assumptions about what is 'normal'. 'Queer studies' has moved from trying to identify famous 'homosexuals' in history to tracing the gradual creation of the idea that exclusively 'heterosexual' behaviour is the social and personal norm ('heteronormativity'). 'Queer' was originally a term of abuse for gays as 'abnormal' from the late nineteenth century on, but it has been reclaimed since the 1990s so that it can now describe not only same-sex desire but, in David Halperin's words, '*whatever* is at odds with the normal,

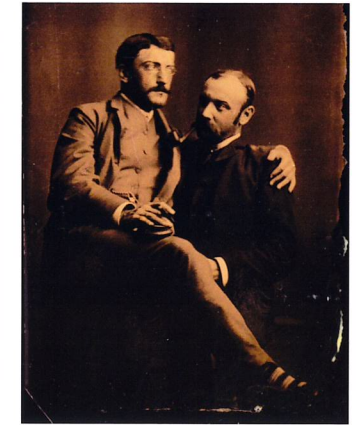
the legitimate, the dominant'. Queer readings of history try to analyse the ways in which cultural forces privilege and legitimize what is considered 'normal'. They usefully remind us that all definitions of what is normal or natural are not inevitable, but are instead fictions created by particular societies, and that these fictions need to find things to label 'abnormal' and 'unnatural', against which to define themselves. Such queer readings can be part of a search for histories that include previously excluded groups such as women, children and the poor (so-called 'subaltern histories'). These histories from the bottom up can offer a valuable alternative to the official histories that nation states have often produced – and still produce – for themselves.

Although same-sex desire seems to be present in all societies, some of the examples in this book show how censorship, persecution and simple silence have often written same-sex desire out of history, not only concealing it from contemporaries but also making it inaccessible to historians in the following centuries. In societies where same-sex desire had to live underground, representing itself with ambiguous signals, it was often hard even for a contemporary to be sure what such signs meant. And it is now hugely irritating for a historian who can never read these signals even like someone from that society might have. What did a gesture, an image, a style of clothing mean for people at the time? For example, some nineteenth-century American photographs show men sitting together on each other's laps and embracing in a way that now suggests to many of us a sexually charged intimacy (opposite). But such poses seem not to have necessarily conveyed that message to the original viewers. Is that man, in the words of the playwright Harvey Fierstein, a 'friend friend or a euphemism friend'? As the art historian David Deitcher remarks:

Two pairs of American friends; the names of the photographers and subjects are unknown.

1837 Quarter-plate daguerrotype photograph, 14.4 x 11.5 cm.

1839 Tintype photograph, 9 x 6.4 cm.



in their elusiveness, their resistance to naming and categorization, such photographs become their own best poetic evidence of the fluidity that marked the relations they reveal but cannot prove.

This is a sign of the continuum of human desire and of our ways of expressing it. It is also a sign of the balancing act that is part of our engagement with the historical other: an unending dialogue between what we recognize as just like us and what we see as different from us. What would it mean if *you* sat on a man's lap like that? What would it have meant twenty years ago, or now but in another country? But among all these cultural uncertainties one thing is reasonably certain: the historical past will have been more varied and 'queerer' than we have often assumed.

Not so long ago, European culture regarded sexuality as something that should not be discussed, especially not in public. Now, however, universities and museums actively research desire and sexuality, often as a means of understanding our

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own ways of constructing identity. In 2006, for example, a British Museum special exhibition on the ‘Warren Cup’ (pp. 50–1) explored ancient attitudes to sexuality. In this, the Roman silver cup showing pairs of men making love was juxtaposed with an image from the 2005 film by Ang Lee, *Brokeback Mountain*. This film explored the love between two cowboys in a homophobic society, and had an immense impact on its audiences. Such a juxtaposition in the displays reminded visitors that same-sex desire has not featured widely in modern European and American culture, in contrast to the art and literature of ancient Greece and Rome. How many romantic films have there been celebrating same-sex love stories compared to those between men and women? And how many with a happy ending, such as E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* (above)? Same-sex love has often been relegated to the margins of art as problematic (and preferably tragic), but this is not necessarily the whole story. ‘Gay’ history is certainly in part a history shaped by persecution and oppression, but same-sex desire has



The tramline in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria where E. M. Forster first met Mohammed el-Adl in 1916. Here a ‘great unrecorded history’ began.

also been irrepressible and remarkably resistant. As the English novelist E. M. Forster (1879–1970) wrote about his Egyptian lover, Mohammed el-Adl:

when I am with him, smoking or talking quietly ahead, or whatever it may be, I see, beyond my own happiness and intimacy, occasional glimpses of the happiness of 1000s of others whose names I shall never hear, and know that there is a great unrecorded history.

The sequence of forty or so objects in this book provides a few glimpses of such a history, from across many periods and places. Almost all the objects come from the British Museum, supplemented with some other examples, and we present them within their various cultures in chronological order. We hope that they will not only illustrate some aspects of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender history, but will also show the diverse material forms that such history takes. Some objects are directly and unambiguously informative about desire and gender identity, while others speak to us more indirectly. For some periods and cultures it has been hard to find relevant objects, for others much easier. Some cultures, such as the classical Mediterranean or Edo period in Japan, have given same-sex desire prominence in prestigious art forms. Some objects have been valued, some suppressed, some simply not collected by the Museum. The modern history of objects can say much about changing cultural attitudes, as well as shaping the data available for modern historians. Such is the nature of our evidence.

Many of the objects we have chosen are visual representations or texts, because these tend to record desire more directly than many other sorts of object. An undecorated pot cannot tell us about the loves of the people who have handled it. But occasionally objects give us an irreplaceable touch of the real

that texts alone cannot provide. On a sheet of Michelangelo's (see pp. 64–5), the combination of the superb drawing and the elegantly written note to his friend, protesting that it is only a first sketch, embodies an infatuated eagerness to impress a young man in a way that feels instantly recognizable to anyone who has ever been in a similar situation. We have tried to include, where possible, contemporary quotes from original voices in order to suggest how the actors perceived their lives, and to evoke specific experiences rather than generalized historical views. It is often surprising how different other cultures are from our own, but it is also surprising how recognizable other people's desires can seem.

Most of all, we would ask you to remember as you read that many other histories are possible. These are just a few pieces – glimpses – of a history as a reminder that diversity is integral to human desire and the whole human condition. Love, desire and gender are never minority concerns.



Glimpses of a history across the world: these are the locations featured in the following pages.