
From its very first pages, the edited collection, *Sex, Time and Place: Queer Histories of London, c. 1850 to the Present*, declares its awareness of the complexity of the task it undertakes: namely, to provide an interdisciplinary exploration of the queer spaces of London over an extensive period of time. The volume is divided into two sections: an introductory one in which the editors, both individually and together, engage in “Framing Queer London,” while the second section, which is comprised of thirteen essays, features the contributors’ attempts at “Exploring Queer London.”

The lack of chronological, thematic or disciplinary categorization in the second section, as well as the absence of an all-embracing conclusion, reflects the fact that, as Simon Avery and Katherine M. Graham note in their joint introduction, the volume intends to “facilitate dialogue across disciplines, spaces and times, in ways that create synergies between the chapters and their topics, both thematically and ideologically” (41). Synergy and connection are not only structurally central here, but they also determine the mode of engagement that the volume wishes to elicit from its readers. In her part of the introduction, Graham actually encourages readers to refrain from reading only those chapters pertinent “to one’s own research interests,” inviting them instead “to read widely –here, to do so is to read inclusively” (25). In this way, readers familiarize themselves with the assumptions underlying the attempt to map the multiplicity of “Queer London,” grasping, at the same time, how this volume differs from previous work in the field. More specifically, for all the transformations that the meaning of the term “queer” has undergone over time, the term has frequently entailed a sense of opposition, contrast, or exception that potentially led to the marginalization of its referents. Consequently, exploring spaces hosting “sexuality, desire and intimacy which trouble and disrupt [‘normalized’] orthodoxies and categories,” this volume essentially engages in an act of “recovery” of what has been, and is still, omitted from narratives of the metropolis, as Avery notes (14, 4). Throughout the volume, time is a connector, rather than a barrier, in the exploration of the mutually informative relationship between space and subjectivity, two concepts that are constantly “in flux, unfixed and changeable,” composing an ever dynamic picture of “Queer London” (10-11). To better illustrate this urban reality, this volume departs from previous studies that were limited to specific subject positions, and addresses diverse manifestations of “sexual practices and identities” across different moments in time and various disciplines (18).

The essays in the second part constitute proof of the volume’s successful completion of its objectives. Methodologically diverse, since their sources include lived experiences, literary and artistic representations, and historical, and biographical research, the essays cover an equally broad thematic range: the AIDS epidemic and the ensuing transformation of urban life for gay men; race as a lens for the perception of non-normative sexuality; the reception and popularity of female appropriations of masculinity; considerations of homosexuality from a legal, and medical
perspective; queer spaces of entertainment; contemporary technology and the reconfiguration of the concept of queer communities through their dissociation from actual physical locations; the life and work of artists such as Simeon Solomon and Francis Bacon; the poetry of Claude McKay, and the fiction of Sarah Waters and Alan Hollinghurst; organizations such as the Victorian British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology and the Anthropological Society; the archival documentation of queer life; this brief overview of the volume’s focal points and thematic axes suggests the various ways in which London influenced, and was, in turn, transformed by the expression of multiple facets of queer sexuality from the mid-Victorian era to the present.

Significantly, London emerges not only as a terrain of opportunity and freedom, but also as a site of containment and loss for queer subjectivities. This contrast highlights the significance of the attempt put forward by the essays collected here. The appreciation of the temporal connections that link seemingly disparate experiences sheds light into the tensions and contradictions that have always been part of queer metropolitan life; the volume effects thus the inclusive reading it pursues (Graham 35), precisely because it views queer London as a diachronically composite organism that evades monolithic signification. Closing his essay on Alan Hollinghurst, Bart Eeckhout notes the author’s acknowledgment of “how ephemeral and uncontainable all those queer lives lived in and around London really are – and how much of their sexual histories is bound to remain forever unwritten” (217). Echoing the fact that the insightful essays of the volume cannot possibly offer an exhaustive retrieval of queer lives and their complex interaction with urban space, this remark suggests, nevertheless, that Sex, Time and Place works against the impossibility of reinstating queer lives in the history of the city, and thus paves the way for similar future endeavours.