

ians such as Ernestine Rose, head of the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library from 1920 to 1942, have sometimes inspired an unrealistic faith in what literacy can do but have also produced significant results, such as promoting integration or preserving the African American artifacts collected by the bibliophile Arthur Schomburg. Library history can be an integral component of a broader cultural history, as it is in work by Roger Chartier, Thomas Augst, Christine Pawley, Janice Radway, David M. Stewart, and others. New digital tools—such as the online database *What Middletown Read*, which contains a decade of circulation records for one American public library in Muncie, Indiana—have made archives accessible for research into the reading habits of many people who did not write about their reading. The microhistories of libraries and book collections can help us understand what reading has meant not only to successful writers but also to the broader, increasingly digitalized population. It is too early for eulogies of the library.

*Barbara Hochman*  
Ben-Gurion University

### Foucault and Queer (Un)Historicism

TO THE EDITOR:

It is likely that as a result of her critique of queer unhistoricism in “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies” (128.1 [2013]: 21–39), Valerie Traub will soon find *Empiricist!* emblazoned across her theoretical chest. When people express the fear that queer studies is dead, perhaps they mean that it is locked in disciplinary repetitions that those of us who lived through the 1980s and 1990s recall all too well. One of the unanticipated consequences of the so-called linguistic turn was that it allowed some in English studies on the one hand to invent a straw historian blind to any critique of history as teleology and on the other to claim that their own efforts to write history are at the vanguard. The

queer-unhistoricism debate repeats these disciplinary conceits.

Meanwhile historians themselves have been engaged in a protracted attempt to grapple with the perils of their discipline. As Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon’s manifesto “Queering History” (*PMLA* 120.5 [2005]: 1608–17; print) suggested, the genealogical roots of queer unhistoricism go back at least to Hayden White (*Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* [1978]). White’s predecessors include Nietzsche, in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” and in the late 1980s and 1990s White’s work was followed, for example, by Ranajit Guha, in *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, and Joan Scott, in *Gender and the Politics of History*.

What is new in the queer-historicism debate is the assertion that, in an oft-cited passage, Foucault posits a final difference between the sodomite and the modern homosexual:

The homosexual of the nineteenth century became a personage: a past, a history, and a childhood; a character; a form of life; a morphology, too. . . . We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, and medical category of homosexuality constituted itself from the moment it was characterized . . . by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain manner of inverting in one’s self the masculine and feminine.

(*La volonté de savoir* [Gallimard, 1976; print; vol. 1 of *Histoire de la sexualité*] 59; my trans.)

Given that Foucault never denied that homo sex existed before the nineteenth century, why do those who seek to queer the Renaissance return again and again to this passage (Goldberg and Menon 1611; Gary Ferguson, *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance: Homosexuality, Gender, Culture* [Ashgate, 2008; print] 1)? If we wish to explore, in periods like the Renaissance, what came to be—not by predestination or intelligent design—the historicodiscursive preconditions of

the homosexual (who, however haphazardly or contradictorily constituted, is a discursive formation whose presence can be located in the archive), nothing in this passage forecloses this effort. The term *queer* was, at least initially, reinvented to refer to a subject other than the nineteenth-century homosexual.

Note that, contra his unhistoricist critics, Foucault does not employ the term *identity* to define a personage. Rather, he uses difference to do so—the difference between a juridical subject and a disciplinary one, between a subject constituted by religious prohibitions and the subject of the science of sexuality. For some reason Robert Hurley, in his translation of the same passage, placed a comma rather than a colon after *personage* (*History of Sexuality: An Introduction* [Vintage, 1990; print] 43). This is not a minor alteration. *Personage* here is shorthand for the new kind of subject Foucault is struggling to define.

One of the basic tenets of structural linguistics is that language is a system of differences with no positive terms. *Homosexual* finds one of its conditions of meaning in its difference from *sodomite*. The fact that both words exist—and circulate in different discursive contexts—suggests their difference from each other.

Finally, in this passage Foucault is not interested in the disappearance of the sodomite—something he never says occurred—nor does he imply that the sodomite and homosexual have no relation to each other. He is, rather, interested in the historical emergence of the homosexual as a discursive category. The contemporary Christian invocation to “hate the sin and not the sinner” is discursive evidence of the sodomite and his continuing life in the present. The endless return to this passage in Foucault suggests queer studies’ investment, for all its claims to the contrary, in identity politics, an investment that is one of the field’s historical conditions of possibility as an academic discipline.

Unfortunately, the unhistoricist emphasis on homo as sameness threatens to replicate

the fantasy that desire is about the securing of “real” bodies and relations. There is nothing intrinsically homo about the homosexual, and *queer* is often deployed as a nagging reminder of this. For those of us queers whose subjectivities were structured, long before we were capable of any kind of unconscious embracing of epithets, by insults like *fag*, *fairy*, *homo*, and *bull dyke*, our homo desire is inextricably wedded to our gender dysfunction and our inability to figure out if our sexual partners are in fact same, other, or something else. Given the hard-fought years of learning to love the (wo)man in me, I am not yet willing to give up the admittedly fatiguing project of attempting to think difference in nonhierarchical terms, perhaps even the nonbinary terms that Robyn Wiegman calls “triangular” in “Eve’s Triangles: Queer Studies beside Itself” (*Reading Eve Sedgwick: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Michael O’Rourke [Palgrave, forthcoming]). My (always provisional) knowledge of history, however, and of the ways in which male privilege has sometimes been underwritten by fantastic identifications with the feminine, troubles my own attempts to finish even these brief comments.

John Champagne

Penn State University, Erie-Behrend

### Jonathan Safran Foer and the Impossible Book

TO THE EDITOR:

In “Combining Close and Distant Reading: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* and the Aesthetic of Bookishness” (128.1 [2013]: 226–31), N. Katherine Hayles bookends some (useful!) Morettian word counting with a close examination of Foer’s die-cut book as one of a number that “are fighting back” against “the epochal shift from print to digital texts,” insisting that the “bodies” of printed books offer something mere information cannot (226).