

English 821.003 Seminar in Critical Theory  
Dept. of English Language & Literature  
University of Michigan, Fall 2009  
Tu 7-10 pm, Aud B AH; W 6-9 pm, G449 MH

David M. Halperin  
3124 Angell Hall, 647-5884  
halperin@umich.edu  
Office Hours: TuTh 2:30-4 or by appt.

## QUEER FICTIONS OF THE PAST

### Course Syllabus

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was.” It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

“I’m always forgetting how sexy the past must have been—it’s the clothes or something.”

—Will Beckwith, in *The Swimming-Pool Library*

#### *Course description:*

A striking feature of the imaginative literature about gay men written in English during the last two decades has been its focus on the past. Some of this writing is based on new historical research undertaken by the writers themselves, but a good deal of it has been inspired by recent scholarly inquiries into the history of homosexuality. The priorities of historical and fictional work are different, of course, but they also disclose a common set of emotional needs and political desires. The purpose of this seminar is to examine what history and literature can do for the gay male past and to examine the traffic between fact and fiction in the history of sexuality.

Much of the best new gay male fiction seems to be preoccupied with situating contemporary gay male life in historical perspective. One way of doing that is to rewrite history so as to bring out in it, or restore to it, a gay male presence that had been missing from standard accounts of the past. Another way is to rewrite the present by measuring the way we live now against earlier forms of gay male existence. The seminar will review some recent gay male historical fiction (both literary and cinematic), surveying its imaginative efforts to portray important events in gay male history, to describe what gay male life was like in other times and places, to place gay male characters at the center of otherwise well-known historical events, or to understand contemporary gay male life in relation to historical calamities such as slavery or HIV/AIDS. We will also read a number of historical treatments of the same

topics. What explains the turn to history in recent writing by or about gay men? How does this literature reinterpret the past? How does it change our sense of history, both official history and minority history, in ways that history itself may not be able to do?

At the same time as it attempts to alter our notions of where we come from, gay historical fiction also redefines who we are. Why do so many writers look to history in order to reinterpret gay male life in the present? What new models of contemporary gay existence does this historical fiction produce? What are the political implications for the current gay movement of different versions of the past? Who wants this history, whom does it serve, what purposes does it advance? What sort of queer future does it project? And how does it help us to trace the workings of desire in more traditional historical scholarship?

*Required texts* (on sale at local bookstores and on library reserve):

- Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988).  
 Mark Merlis, *American Studies* (1994; Los Angeles: Alyson, 2009).  
 Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988; London: Vintage, 1989).  
 Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001; New York: Scribner, 2003).  
 Maria McCann, *As Meat Loves Salt* (2001; Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2002).  
 Neil Bartlett, *Mr Clive & Mr Page* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996; 1998).  
 Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. Martin Wiggins and Robert Lindsey, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1997).

Additional required readings in the Resources section of the CTools website for the seminar.

*Optional text* (on library reserve):

- James Gardiner, *Who's A Pretty Boy, Then? One Hundred and Fifty Years of Gay Life in Pictures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998).

*Assigned work for the class:*

Attendance at all meetings of the seminar and all screenings of films; punctual completion of all reading assignments; brief analysis of each reading or set of readings, due in writing *before* the seminar for which the readings are assigned; a 10-minute oral report in class on **December 9**; and a critical essay, due on **December 14**. See, further, *Notes on the writing assignments*, below.

*Schedule of reading, writing, and viewing assignments:*

- Tuesday, September 8: *The Dead Boys' Club*, dir. Mark Christopher (1992);  
*The Attendant*, dir. Isaac Julien (1993);  
*The Watermelon Woman*, dir. Cheryl Dunye (1996).
- Wednesday, September 9: Will Fellows, "Charlotte and Me: Preservation-Minded from Childhood," *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 3-12, 267;  
 John D'Emilo, "Allan Bérubé: A Visionary Historian," *CLAGSnews*, 18.1 (Spring 2008), 5.
- Tuesday, September 15: *Velvet Goldmine*, dir. Todd Haynes (1998).
- Wednesday, September 16: Scott Bravmann, "Metanarrative and Gay Identity," *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3-14, 130-32;  
 Michel Foucault, "The Lives of Infamous Men" (1977), in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume III (New York: The New Press, 2001), 157-75;  
 Carolyn Dinshaw, "Got Medieval?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10. 2 (April 2001), 202-212;  
 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-52, 165-76;  
 Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*: read from start to p. 59. *As you read, be sure to consult the notes (pp. 241-54) along with the text to which they refer.*
- Tuesday, September 22: *Lilies*, dir. John Greyson (1996).
- Wednesday, September 23: Jeffrey Weeks, "From Sin to Crime," *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), 11-22, 247-49;

Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man?* (complete);

A live interview with Bartlett, broadcast in 2005 on a local U-M radio station and available on the CTools website for this class, lets you hear Bartlett's voice and recognize its cadences in his writing;

Richard Dellamora, "Looking Back Toward the Future: Neil Bartlett's Gift for Oscar Wilde," *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 31-42, 201-202;

Dianne Chisholm, "The City of Collective Memory," *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 101-144, 282-91.

Tuesday, September 29:

*The Great Pink Scare*, dir. Tug Yourgau and Dan Miller (2005);

*Advise and Consent*, dir. Otto Preminger (1962).

Wednesday, September 30:

Do some quick web searches and see what you can find out about F. O. Matthiessen, Newton Arvin, Joel Dorius, and Edward Spofford;

Jay Grossman, "The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen's Whitman, Whitman's Matthiessen," in *American Literature*, 70.4 (December, 1998), 799-832;

Barry Werth, *The Scarlet Professor. Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered by Scandal* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 1-7, 193-251;

Mark Merlis, *American Studies*.

Tuesday, October 6:

*Looking for Langston*, dir. Isaac Julien (1988);

*My Beautiful Laundrette*, dir. Stephen Frears (1985).

Wednesday, October 7:

Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*.

Tuesday, October 13:

*Pirated!* dir. Nguyen Tan Hoang (2000);

*Among Others*, dir. Trac Vu (1997);

*Sadness*, dir. Tony Ayres (1999).

Wednesday, October 14:

Seneca, *Natural Questions* 1.16.1-3;

- Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 80.16.1-5;
- Jeffrey Weeks, "Prelude to Reform," *Coming Out*, 156-67, 262-63;
- Patrick Higgins, "The Montagu Trials," *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), 231-46;
- Matt Houlbrook, "Regulation," *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 19-37, 279-84;
- Richard Dellamora, "Tradition and Apocalypse in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*," *Apocalyptic Overtures*, 173-91, 220-22;
- Robert J. Corber, "Sentimentalizing Gay History: Mark Merlis, Alan Hollinghurst, and the Cold War Persecution of Homosexuals," *Arizona Quarterly*, 55.4 (Winter 1999), 115-41;
- David Alderson, "Desire as Nostalgia: The Novels of Alan Hollinghurst," in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 29-48.

Wednesday, October 21:

- Refresh your recollection of Irish Republican history by checking out the chronology at [http://www.irishhistorylinks.net/Irish\\_History\\_Timeline.html#Great\\_Famine](http://www.irishhistorylinks.net/Irish_History_Timeline.html#Great_Famine) and skimming through the entries for the years from 1845-49 to 1949, paying especial attention to the period from 1879 to 1925; also consult the Wikipedia article on Roger Casement;
- William Butler Yeats, "Easter 1916";
- Brian Lavery, "Irish Revive Rites for Easter Revolt, and Debate Its Merits," *New York Times* (April 17, 2006);
- Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys*, from start to 292; a copy of the original opening chapter, later removed, is available on CTools.

Tuesday, October 27:

- The Einstein of Sex*, dir. Rosa von Praunheim (1999).

- Wednesday, October 28: Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim, Two Boys* (complete);  
David Halperin, "Pal O' Me Heart," *London Review of Books*, 25.10 (May 22, 2003), 32-33;  
Jodie Medd, "'Patterns of the Possible': National Imaginings and Queer Historical (Meta)Fictions in Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*," *GLQ*, 13.1 (2007), 1-31.
- Monday, November 2: Lecture by David Alderson, 4 pm, 2239 Lane Hall.
- Tuesday, November 3: *Madame Satã*, dir. Karim Ainouz (2002).
- Wednesday, November 4: Paul Hammond, "Figuring Sex between Men," *Figuring Sex between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 5-61;  
Maria McCann, *As Meat Loves Salt*, from start to 312.
- Monday, November 9: Fiction reading by Allan Gurganus, 5 pm, UMMA Helmut Stern Auditorium.
- Tuesday, November 10: *Plata quemada*, dir. Marcelo Piñeyro (2000).
- Wednesday, November 11: Cynthia Herrup, "The Patriarch at Home: The Trial of the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven for Rape and Sodomy," *History Workshop Journal*, 41 (Spring, 1996), 1-18;  
Alan Bray, "Friends and Enemies," *The Friend* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 177-204, 339-40;  
Maria McCann, *As Meat Loves Salt* (complete).
- Tuesday, November 17: *Swoon*, dir. Tom Kalin (1992);  
*Rope*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock (1948).
- Wednesday, November 18: John J. Glessner, "The Story of a House" (1923);  
Bartlett, *Mr Clive & Mr Page*;  
Mark W. Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 68-85, 182-84;  
Matt Houlbrook, "The Baths," *Queer London*, 93-108, 300-304.

Tuesday, November 24:	No class.
Tuesday, December 1:	<i>Edward II</i> , dir. Derek Jarman (1991).
Wednesday, December 2:	Marlowe, <i>Edward II</i> ; Jonathan Goldberg, “Sodomy and Society: The Case of Christopher Marlowe,” in <i>Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretation of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama</i> , ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991 [first publ. 1984]), 75-82; Paul Hammond, “Edward II and Gaveston,” <i>Figuring Sex between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester</i> , 117-28; Judith Haber, “Introduction: Consummate Play” and “Submitting to History: <i>Edward II</i> ,” <i>Desire and Dramatic Form in Early Modern England</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-9 and 134-38, 27-38 and 143-48; Stephen Orgel, “Tobacco and Boys: How Queer Was Marlowe?” <i>GLQ</i> , 6.4 (2000), 555-576.
Tuesday, December 8:	<i>Voor een verloren soldaat</i> , dir. Roeland Kerbosch (1992).
Wednesday, December 9:	Oral reports.

*Notes on the writing assignments:*

There are two related kinds of writing assigned for this seminar, interim and final.

1. *Interim*. As you do the reading, note down what you consider to be some of the most interesting, original, unusual, important, striking, or salient points, especially ones that have to do with the relations between the history of desire and the desire for history. Don’t feel obliged to comment on each text individually: take the readings as a group (and feel free to include the films).

You should not attempt to be exhaustive; rather, you should confine yourself to identifying, as briefly or concisely as possible, in no more than a sentence or two, some key points in the readings—the ones that struck you, that you found significant, that reminded you of other points in some of the other readings, or that you considered worth emphasizing in the context of our discussions. Limit yourself to three or four points, and in any case do not exceed half a dozen. The result should not be an essay or even a detailed outline, just a few but essential observations, some points you consider crucial and to which you would like to call attention—the sort of thing that, ideally, our discussions in class should take up and pursue further.

Your remarks are due *by noon on Wednesday*, six hours before our seminar convenes. Send your brief analysis to all members of the seminar, including myself, via the electronic bulletin board that I have set up for the purposes of discussion and exchange among the members of the class. The address of that bulletin board is:

f9-english-821-003@umich.edu

If that address malfunctions, or is unavailable for some reason, you can also write to:

qfictions@ctools.umich.edu

Check your e-mail between noon and the time the seminar begins to read what the other members of the seminar have posted about the readings. Our discussions will continue the exchanges already underway online.

2. *Final*. You have two options for the final essay. As the semester draws to a close, you may wish to look over the weekly notes you submitted over the course of the term, reconsider them, find in them a theme or preoccupation or critical agenda, and develop it further, with reference to the material we have covered. The result should be a critical essay of some 5000 words that works up a series of reflections in a coherent way. Alternately, you may wish to consider a work of gay or lesbian or transgender historical fiction that we did not cover and bring it into the framework for thinking about queer fictions of the past that we have elaborated over the course of the semester. Once again, the result should be a critical essay of about 5000 words.

Be prepared to talk about your project to the members of the seminar in the form of an oral report, *lasting no more than 10 minutes*, on December 9. Submit your final essay to me online, by attachment to an e-mail message *sent to my personal address only* (halperin@umich.edu), on or before December 14.

*Final notes:*

If you have a learning disability or some other special need that requires accommodation, please let me know as soon as possible, producing whatever documentation may be appropriate, and I will be happy to make the necessary adjustments.

Also, if your religious observances conflict with any academic obligation for this class as specified in this syllabus, and you wish for that reason to be excused from class or to make alternate arrangements to fulfill an assignment, you must let me know by **September 28**. Current University policy does not require me to honor such requests if they are made after that date.

Feel free to use the electronic bulletin board as a forum to raise questions, to make points that got left out of class discussion, to bring up things you meant to say in class but forgot, to make that witty comeback you wish you'd had the presence of mind to think of at the time, to ask for points of clarification, to make announcements, to seek information from members of the class, or simply to continue the discussion.

If you have any questions at any point, or if you wish to discuss the reading outside of class, or if you wish to discuss any other topic, you should feel free to drop by my office (3124 Angell Hall) during office hours (Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:30 to 4 pm) or to make an appointment to see me at some other time. I'll be delighted to talk to you. My office telephone number is 647-5884, and there is an answering machine there; you can also contact me directly by e-mail.

The quality of this course is enhanced by the feedback, suggestions, and considerations of the seminar participants. The course is evaluated in the final week using the formal departmental online teaching evaluation system. But I also welcome and value your feedback, either orally or by email, at any time over the course of the semester. Your perspectives, concerns, and experience of the course constitute useful material for me in terms of developing a reflexive teaching practice, and every effort will be made to respond to student ideas and concerns while maintaining commitment to the course objectives.