

# Forum

## The Library: Fantasy and Reality

TO THE EDITOR:

Simon Gikandi's timely comments on libraries as sources of inspiration, ambition, and fantasy offer an opportunity to consider additional ways of bringing the history of libraries into literary study ("Editor's Column: The Fantasy of the Library" [128.1 (2013): 9–20]). Gikandi's concentration on biographical and autobiographical material skirts a methodological question: how can we reconcile "the fantasy of the library"—especially as reflected in testimonials to it—and the reality of individual encounters with an institution, its representatives, and its books? There is always a gap between the personal experience of a book and reports of that experience, especially when they are written for publication. Retrospective accounts trail behind the initial experience; they begin when reading ends, sometimes long afterward. The belated understanding that libraries are funded by elites and represent cultural power does not undo the formative impact that a book or a library has had on a reader. But if autobiographical accounts are partial, while institutional histories, as Gikandi suggests, are often dry and unilluminating, how are we to reconstruct the challenges facing a first-generation freed man or an immigrant attempting to acquire the skills indispensable for using an American public library—approaching the librarian, filling out cards, complying with due dates; how can we gauge the cultural significance of a father's book collection for a young girl such as Edith Newbold Jones (Wharton) or Charlotte Perkins (Gilman)?

Libraries have produced (and continue to produce) realities as well as myths; we need creative strategies to understand how libraries have helped to shape the use of books as material artifacts, containers of meaning, models to emulate, gendered symbols, decorative objects, and much more. In small public institutions across the United States, librar-

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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.

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## 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