

Categorically Famous: Literary Celebrity and Sexual Liberation in 1960s America

By Guy Davidson

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Reviewed by Benjamin Kahan

GUY DAVIDSON'S EXCITING AND INNOVATIVE BOOK IS AT THE VANGUARD OF THE RECENT taxonomic turn in queer studies, which explores how classifications of knowledge and knowledge systems produce our understandings of sexuality. By the taxonomic turn, I have in mind a spate of new books like Jeffrey Masten's *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time* (2016), Valerie Traub's *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (2016), Melissa Adler's *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge* (2017), Zeb Tortorici's *Sins Against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* (2018), and Michael Lucey's *Someone: The Pragmatics of Misfit Sexualities, From Colette to Hervé Guibert* (2019) that thickly describe the way systems of meaning like philological inquiry or judicial records of 'sins against nature' in colonial New Spain 'precook' their contents, and thereby frame what is known and can be known about historical sexual practices and subjectivities (Jeffrey Masten quoted in Traub (13)). These books attend to the conceptual force of sexual categorisation in the production of sexuality and sexual knowledge, providing accounts of the transmission of sexual knowledge and charting the ways in which subjects navigate, belong to, disavow, adopt, adapt, and disidentify with these categorisations. Davidson sees celebrityhood as one such knowledge producing system, contending that it 'involve[s] discursive struggles over the norms of sexual identity and the permissibility of varieties of sexual expressions and attitudes' (5). That is, Davidson reads 1960s literary celebrities like James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, and Gore Vidal as indexing a host of cultural anxieties and obsessions about sex and sexuality, understanding them as what Michel Foucault calls 'especially dense transfer points' for negotiating the boundaries of public and private (Foucault 103). Celebrities are able to do this important cultural work because they are 'generally understood by scholars to involve a crossover or confusion between the public and the private' (3), becoming celebrities at the moment that, as Graeme Turner argues, interest in them shifts from their public role (in sports or film) "to investigating the details of their private lives" (Quoted

in 3). Davidson accents literary celebrities as opposed to culture industry celebrities because, following Loren Glass, he sees them as imbued with greater individuality underwritten by their authorial creativity (Glass 4). He attends in particular to celebrities who pressed against the limits of the 'glass closet' to engage homosexuality in public at a time of reticence around queer celebrity, suggesting that queer celebrities in the 1960s provide a crucial locus for thinking about 'the tight reticulation of subjectivity, sexuality, and literature' and how homosexuality could be made visible (7) (Sedgwick 80).

Davidson's exploration of mid-twentieth century celebrity has important stakes for queer theory. He is interested in these particular literary celebrities not because they are the first proto-visible homosexuals—one could look to earlier figures like Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, Radclyffe Hall, or W. H. Auden—but because their visibility was enmeshed with and fomented a particular kind of visibility: namely, that of gay liberation. To put this differently, Davidson sees their public homosexuality as 'contribut[ing] to the movement toward liberation' and helping to 'consolidate gay men and lesbians as a politicized minority' (18, 9). In stressing the making of politicised gay and lesbian identity as liberation knowledge categories, Davidson argues that queer theory 'has repressed its own indebtedness to gay liberation' (96). Drawing out this occluded history of gay liberation, *Categorically Famous* makes evident that queer theory has perhaps overlearned the Foucauldian lessons that sexual identity categories work primarily as tools for social control, enabling 'coercive operations of power/knowledge' (5). Instead, Davidson maps the 'epistemological and political affordances' of 'treating sexual identities not as essences but as deeply meaningful for both individual and group experience' (3). Doing so, promises to open up the archive of theoretical texts that queer theory engages with—recovering Foucault's interlocutors Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, and Wilhelm Reich—and also helps us to understand the relative paucity of work in queer literary studies in the period from WWII to just before the advent of the AIDS crisis.¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a representative example when in some of the closing sentences of 'Axiomatic' she writes: 'I've wondered about my ability to keep generating ideas about "the closet", compared to a relative inability, so far, to have new ideas about the substantive differences made by post-Stonewall imperatives to rupture or vacate that space' (Sedgwick 63). Davidson would understand this 'inability' under the sign of what he calls 'the anticategorical imperative', by which he means queer studies's 'reflexive valorization of instability, indeterminacy, and opacity' (3). By instead training increased attention on the ways that the categories of gay and lesbian become politicised identities, Davidson provides a new history of the affects of the queer past.

¹ I specify literary studies here because a large number of US queer histories do focus on this period.

Featuring two chapters on Baldwin, two on Sontag, and two on Vidal followed by an Afterword, *Categorically Famous* furnishes a rich account of the shame that will come to underpin the very pride that is associated with gay identity in the post-Stonewall era. For example, rather than the erotic vomiting described by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in 'Sex in Public' (1996), the recurrent image of 'involuntary alimentary expulsion' that begins Davidson's Baldwin chapters is induced by Baldwin's shame about homosexuality (21). Ranging across much of Baldwin's oeuvre and his career as a public intellectual, Davidson reads against queer accounts of Baldwin instead positing what he sees as an increasingly consolidating gay black identity. In particular, Davidson alights upon moments in Baldwin's famously celebrated prose style that are striated by shame and might be understood as "'bad" style' (47). Davidson argues that when Baldwin 'broaches homosexual sex and love, Baldwin often modulates his characteristically complex prose style into a new register of intricacy' (47, 55). These moments for Davidson don't undo nascent articulations of politicised homosexuality so much as they wrestle with emerging nominations and categorisations.

Davidson also charts a direct line between Susan Sontag's life and work and the politics of gay liberation. Beginning with one of Sontag's most famous coinages—the 'New Sensibility'—which nominates the shifting relations between high and low culture and the concomitant transformation of the relations between art and audience that occurs in the 1960s, Davidson discovers that the term has been repurposed by Herbert Marcuse 'to signal the unprecedented fusion of politics, aesthetics, and eroticism that characterised the counterculture' (76). One difference between Sontag's celebrity and that of Baldwin and Vidal (and thus of her relation to gay liberation and theirs) is that for much of Sontag's career she possessed 'a nominal public identity as a heterosexual' (76). Davidson fascinatingly traces the ways in which the deep secrecy of Sontag's queerness was known, hinted at, and deployed to shame her by figures like Norman Podhoretz, Philip Rahv, John Barth, and Irving Howe. We might see her then as having not so much a mass queer celebrity as a coterie queer celebrity known among New York intellectuals of the time. 'Notes on "Camp"' exemplifies this coterie queer celebrity in its 'partly visible, partly hidden authorial personhood [that] both feeds into and works against a nascent gay politics' which Davidson brilliantly tracks (102). His reading of this essay is nothing short of a tour de force.

The final two chapters are the book's finest and represent the best writing on Vidal to date. Vidal may seem like an odd choice for a work on categories, as Davidson himself notes, since he is famous for saying 'there is no such thing as a homosexual or a heterosexual person. There are only homo- or heterosexual acts' (Quoted on 125). If celebrity is ostensibly dependent on a life operating apart from a body of work, then one of the major contributions of the Vidal chapters is to demonstrate

how proximately Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) and its eponymous character stand in relation to Vidal himself. For example, Davidson reads the back cover of the novel featuring two metal casts of Vidal's face as creating an equivalence between Vidal, the eighteen-foot high statue of Myra which featured in the book and traveled the country to promote the book in Vidal's place, and Myra herself. Davidson sees this identification as reaching its apotheosis when the conservative commentator William F. Buckley Jr. called Vidal a 'queer' on live television. In the chapter devoted to this encounter, Davidson theorises the embarrassment that Buckley felt in articulating this 'private' fact about Vidal in public and helps us to understand how the relation between embarrassment (which has not received much attention in queer studies) and shame (which has received a lot of attention in queer studies) might illuminate the shifting ground between the personal and the political as well as the private and the public just before gay liberation.

The book closes with an Afterword which maps the contemporary celebritiescape and how the imperatives of secrecy have been replaced by 'the injunction to decloset oneself' and the ways in which celebrity is still structured by 'the seemingly hard-to-shake logic of sexual identity' (177). Davidson's book is a lightning strike of insight about the visibility of gay and lesbian life in mid-twentieth century America and furnishes us with the genealogy of gay liberation's relation to queer theory that we have been waiting for. A must read for anyone interested in twentieth century American literature, queer studies, or celebrity studies.

BENJAMIN KAHAN is an Associate Professor of English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Louisiana State University. He has held postdoctoral fellowships at Washington University in St. Louis, Emory University, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Sydney, the National Humanities Center, and the Reed Foundation. During the 2020-2021 academic year, Kahan will hold a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. He is the author of *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Duke, 2013) and *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergences of Sexuality* (Chicago, 2019). He is also the editor of *Heinrich Kaan's 'Psychopathia Sexualis' (1844): A Classic Text in the History of Sexuality* (Cornell, 2016), *The Cambridge History of Queer American Literature* (under contract with Cambridge), and a co-editor of *Theory Q*, a book series from Duke University Press.

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