How do we make sexual knowledge? In particular, what processes are involved in generating knowledge about sexuality in the past? I suggest that those of us involved in historical sexuality studies might gain some analytical purchase on these questions by entertaining three general theses: 1 that how we address the history of sexuality is as important as what we discover about prior organizations of erotic desire; that sexuality is best approached as a flexible and capacious category of analysis (rather than a delimited or fixed object of study); and that our historiographic methods might benefit from consideration of what it means to “know” sexuality in the first place.

Debates about historiographic method have been central to the field of sexuality studies since its beginnings: for instance, regarding the salience of acts versus identities, and whether or not to privilege historical alterity or continuism; the relative claims of comprehensive period chronologies in contrast to specific local histories; and the recognition of the politically fraught relationship between pastness, particularly the premodern, and sexualized formations of racial, ethnic, and national otherness. 2 In addition, debates about the relative merits of literary readings versus social history—or, to put this in less disciplinary terms, of the relations between representation and “real life,” metaphors and materiality, texts and their mediation, signification and social practice—have been constitutive of the field. 3

Yet, even as historians have taken the “narrative turn” and devised a more interdisciplinary cultural history of sexuality, new methodological lines recently have been drawn by certain early modern literary critics, writ-
ing from the perspective of queer theory, who allege that a failure to treat sex primarily as representation has resulted unwittingly in the creation of triumphant developmental teleologies that conscript earlier sexual regimes into a “preemptively defined category of the present (‘modern homosexuality’).” In different but complementary ways, Carla Freccero, Jonathan Goldberg, Madhavi Menon, Martin Eisner, and Marc Schachter advocate the specific capacities of formal textual analysis—especially deconstruction and psychoanalysis—to provide a less teleological, and thereby less normalizing, “homohistory.”

I share many of the aims of these critics. Nonetheless, I have several qualms about their proposed strategies. Elsewhere I have argued that their championing of synchronic analysis, and their rejection of chronological history as necessarily teleological and normalizing, depends on a caricature of the discipline of history, as well as an overestimation of the work that deconstruction can do. Here I want to suggest that their privileging of literary over historical approaches threatens to harden disciplinary lines, not because historians will attend to these critics’ concerns, but because their lack of real engagement with historical work virtually assures that historians will not. But rather than simply argue that we treat sex simultaneously as metaphoric and material, and construct its history through synchronic and diachronic analyses, I propose that recognizing the status of sexuality as an epistemological problem might provide critical traction beyond affording less tendentious terms for methodological debate. Furthermore, by advocating, as an affirmative intellectual stance, what we don’t know as well as what we can’t know about the history of sexuality, I hope to direct attention away from disciplinary turf wars while encouraging a more pedagogical disposition toward sexual knowledge.

That sexuality poses a problem of signification long has been recognized by historicist scholars. Several years ago, for instance, literary critic Laurie Shannon, drawing on the work of historian Alan Bray, argued that there is nothing fully “dispositive” about the power of sexuality in the early modern period to convey particular meanings. Or, as I rephrased their insights in The Renaissance of Lesbianism, “Erotic acts come to signify . . . through a complex and continual social process.” Because erotic desires and acts operate unreliably as a trigger for articulation, they have seemed
to require discursive framing in order to reveal the meanings and values they may, or, just as importantly, may not, convey. Historicist scholars have tended to negotiate the uncertainty of sexual signification by describing early modern concepts through the period’s own languages and idioms, as well as by locating sexuality within densely contextualized domains—in essence, momentarily stabilizing the meanings of sex through other discourses: legal statutes and trials of sodomites and tribades, medical descriptions of the use and “abuse” of genitalia, and prescriptive literature articulating sexual mores. If this strategy has now settled into what one critic calls “the routines of discursive contextualization,”12 it also has led some scholars to move beyond identity as the governing question of the history of sexuality—shifting the analytical and political imperative away from inclusion, for instance, of lesbians in history, and toward the slippery borders and uneven edges where erotic desires, bodies, and acts rub up against other bodies, fields of signification, and social concerns.13

Nonetheless, no scholar, to my knowledge, has used the instability of sexual signification to think beyond disciplinary divides. I propose that we might do so by considering the problem of sexuality’s signification as opening onto a broader vista: namely, the epistemological status of sexuality as a knowledge relation. Others have noted the radical incommensurability between erotic desire and the social shapes it assumes; for instance, Goldberg and Menon characterize desire “as a formation that rarely has a single objective correlative by which to be measured,” and Eisner and Schachter refer to sexuality’s “epistemic uncertainty.”14 Along with them, I suggest that we grapple with the circumstance that, in fundamental yet manifold ways, sex, as a category of human thought, volition, behavior, and representation, is opaque, inaccessible, and resistant to understanding.

What happens when our quest for knowledge encounters this resistance? My past attempt to write a cultural history of early modern lesbianism yields several pertinent instances. For example, how are we to locate the lines between passionate friendship and eroticism in that period, especially insofar as women were officially disbarred from the ideology of friendship? How, as the historian Anna Clark once asked, are we to positively identify the look, the caress, the sigh?15 What is the basis for interpreting kissing, touching, embracing, or sharing a bed as erotic—or not?
Such questions, which point to the difficulty of defining what “sex” actually is (or was), generally go unasked by historians and historicists. Perhaps this is because most historians and literary critics have been more preoccupied with erotic attitudes, affects, identities, and ideologies than with the details of sexual practices. For all the field’s awareness of the contingency of sexual meanings, the content of sex has been strangely presumable, apparently interpretable through such ready-to-hand transhistorical rubrics as “heterosexuality,” “sodomy,” and “reproductive sex” (or, in a queer idiom, “heteronormativity” and “cruising”). Such vague referents function as placeholders for a sexual activity everywhere assumed, but rarely described. The material, corporeal aspects of sexual activity remain surprisingly underarticulated.

I am not the first to offer this observation. A decade ago, in an essay titled “Finding the Bodies,” historian Cynthia Herrup diagnosed a constitutive embarrassment among historians about the physicality of sex.16 Chastising her colleagues for seeing something other than sex when they analyze early modern discourses, she critiques the tendency to read the sexual body as a metaphor for concerns that extend beyond the body—a tendency she argues is due to self-consciousness about the object of study: “to date,” she says, “the most successful (least threatening) way to make sex matter has been to disembody it. So we point out echoes of sex where it physically is not and claim to find something more than sex where it physically is.”17 Having found a rich documentary archive associated with the sodomy trial of the Earl of Castlehaven in the mid-seventeenth century—including descriptions of anal sodomy, rape, masturbation, and interracial intercourse—Herrup urges historians to resist this hermeneutic error, to stop reiterating the reticence of the archive, and instead help it to speak.

Although I believe that the causes of scholarly reserve are more complex than professional anxiety about academic legitimacy, the rarity with which scholars address what actually happens when bodies “have sex” confirms the perspicacity of Herrup’s call to “find the bodies.” At the same time, however, we need to approach those bodies with expectations qualified by our awareness of the instability of sexual signification. Our tendency to unthinkingly presume the material contents of sex may be offset by focusing a spotlight on material sex acts, but the resistant epis-
temological status of sex will not be vanquished by some truth hidden in the archives. This is because any historical question about sex is not merely historical; it is also hermeneutic and epistemological—a question of the category of sex as such.

Thus, rather than take recourse in one disciplinary method over another, I propose that we use the epistemological opacity of sex to inform the methods by which we pursue knowledge about it. Were we to adopt a more deliberate epistemological approach, we would recast the dynamics among sexuality, signification, and historiography as a problem of knowledge relations. To explore what this might mean, I offer four interrelated implications for methodology and pedagogy that such a reformulation would entail.

First, because of the opacity of sexuality, the relation between the material and the metaphoric, reality and representation, will remain both inextricable and shifting, subject to temporary stasis only through the discursive framing we impose upon it. Of necessity, those discursive frames are both our own and those specific to each historical period; and they impart a doubled partiality (incompleteness and bias) to our knowledge. Second, the explanatory power of any discipline-based analysis will remain limited. Neither the teasing out of hermeneutic complexity nor a comprehensive combing of the archives can secure sexual signification. Greater epistemological awareness cannot adjudicate between the metaphoric and the material statuses of sex, much less between the protocols of our diverse methods. Rather, foregrounding the epistemological problems posed by sex could render such mediation less salient by changing the terms of our questions. Third, by shifting our focus, an epistemological approach would encourage more metacritical reflection on our collective projects. What does it mean to possess sexual knowledge, both of the past and for the present? What can knowledge about erotic practices tell us—and, just as importantly, not tell us, about history and ourselves? If sexuality’s history comprises a knowledge relation, is there any merit to the study of sexual ignorance, including not only our scholarly ignorance of the past, but that of prior historical actors (whether considered as fictional or dramatic characters, as subjects in poetry and visual art, or as members of society)? And what kinds of knowledge relations are implied by our own desire to know
about sex, especially when such desires have been, at least since Foucault, the subject of trenchant critique?

This final question takes us beyond the realm of methodology and into the terrain of pedagogy. It is one of the ironies of sexuality studies that only in the wake of Foucault’s genealogy of modern discourses of sexuality (which mapped the relations between knowledge, power, and pleasure) did the history of sexuality gain an institutional foothold in the academy. Insofar as the will to knowledge is aligned with the will to power, and the requirements of our teaching and scholarship necessarily involve putting sex into discourse, our own desires for knowledge about sexuality, and our role in communicating that knowledge, risk captivation within the modern disciplining of sex. I suspect that the tension between Foucault’s critique and our location within the academy may haunt the pedagogical aspirations of those scholars who teach sexuality’s history, contributing to the diffidence and detachment diagnosed by Herrup. Yet, we avoid confronting the complex pedagogical function of our scholarship and teaching at some cost. On the one hand, we cede too much ground to our conservative critics, who seek to silence speech about sex; on the other hand, we fail to respond affirmatively to our students’ desires for knowledge that might affect their erotic lives. Advancing a pedagogical imperative in light of this opacity would involve critical reflection on the conditions of knowledge production and transmission—that is, on our own implication within a scientia sexualis. It would entail owning up to the desire for sexual knowledge (our own and our students’), and how such desire, especially when channeled through the past, speaks to current conditions of erotic diversity. Finally, it would encourage us to assert the analytical value of sexual ignorance.

In staking a claim for the value of ignorance, I echo but also extend Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s deconstruction of the relations between ignorance and knowledge in Epistemology of the Closet. Whereas Sedgwick’s analytic of “the closet” approached the productivity of “ignorance effects” primarily through the politically noxious work they are conscripted to do (“harnessed, licensed, and regulated on a mass scale for striking enforcements”), I want to direct attention toward the potentially positive effects that may be fostered by sexual ignorance. One such effect could be the reconceptualization of sexual historiography as a capacious and aspiration-
al form of “sex education.” The sex education I have in mind would affirm the difficulty and obscurity of sex as a rich epistemological resource—as a heuristic with which to think as well as act. The obstacles we face in making sexual history can be used to illuminate the difficulty of knowing sexuality; and both impediments might be adopted as a guiding principle of historiography and pedagogy. Sex may be good to think with, not because it permits us access, but because it doesn’t.

Such an intellectual disposition would recognize in what we don’t know, as well as what we can’t know, not only the partiality of our methods and a spur to future inquiry, but an intractability that has been constitutive of the history of sex, and which continues to inform our relations to that history. It is not just that the truth of sex is not fully attainable or representable in words, as the contingencies of sexual signification manifest. It is also the case that the project of knowing sex, thinking sex, and making sexual knowledge is situated within the space of a contradiction—between, on the one hand, respect for the embodied specificity of material sex acts, and, on the other hand, recognition of the impossibility of our ever fully knowing what such acts might mean. It is the task of those of us in historical sexuality studies to work this contradiction, to render it productive. Once translated into historiographic, literary critical, and pedagogical practice, this intellectual disposition has the potential to shift our scholarly horizon. In recasting the issues as those of epistemology and pedagogy (rather than identity), of knowledge and ignorance (rather than inclusion), of how we know as much as what we know, we might be in a position to develop a scholarly ethics worthy of the history of sexuality.20

Notes

1. By historical sexuality studies, I refer primarily to those scholars working within, and at the intersection of, literary studies, the history of sexuality, and LGBT/ queer studies.

2. For an introduction to these debates, see Premodern Sexualities, ed. Louise Fradenberg and Carla Freccero (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); and Queering the Middle Ages, ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

3. For a recent summary of the relationship between history and literary criti-
cism, see Dagmar Herzog, “Syncopated Sex: Transforming European Sexual Cultures,” American Historical Review 114, no. 5 (Dec. 2009): 1–22. Representation, of course, also encompasses visual texts, but debates about methodology for representing sex within art history have not been particularly influential across disciplines.


7. Epistemology, of course, has been a central concern of feminist theorists from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler, but they have focused mainly on issues of ontology and intelligibility, rather than the corporeal reality of sexual behaviors in the past.


Making Sexual Knowledge


