



© 2019 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: McMahon, E. 2019. Literary Celebrity and Queer Sexuality in the 1960s. *Cultural Studies Review*, 25:2, 326-329. <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6891>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj>

BOOK REVIEW

Literary Celebrity and Queer Sexuality in the 1960s

Elizabeth McMahon

University of New South Wales

Corresponding author: Elizabeth McMahon: e.mcmahon@unsw.edu.au; 223, Level 2 Robert Webster; UNSW Sydney High St Kensington, NSW 2052 Australia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6891>

Article history: Accepted 10/17/2019; Published 22/11/2019

Categorically Famous: Literary Celebrity and Sexual Liberation in 1960s America, Guy Davidson Post '45 Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019.

Cloth ISBN: 9781503602359; Paper ISBN: 9781503609198; Digital ISBN: 9781503609204; Recommended Retail Price, \$30.00

Although it is usual to maintain the veneer of objectivity when reviewing scholarly texts, I want to begin by saying that I had the honour of launching Guy Davidson's *Categorically Famous: Literary Celebrity and Sexual Liberation in 1960* at the Stanley Street Gallery in Darlinghurst on 22 August 2019, an event that drew together academic colleagues and friends in a celebration of the book and an instantiation of its argument about queer scholarship and community.

Davidson opens *Categorically Famous: Literary Celebrity and Sexual Liberation in 1960s America* with an account of the 1992 *Seinfeld* episode in which a secreted letter reveals that the father of George Costanzo's girlfriend, Susan, had a passionate affair with the writer John Cheever (1912-1982). As Davidson writes, Cheever had himself become 'paradoxically famous for being closeted, throwing into relief pre-Stonewall and post-Stonewall conceptions of homosexuality as they play out in relation to the public figure of the author.' 'The Cheever Letters' episode, itself an exemplar of popular media, indicates 'the tangled relations between sexuality, liberation and mass mediated literary fame' (1). These complex and contradictory entanglements are the subject of *Categorically Famous*, which has a specific focus on the lives and works of three queer literary celebrities: James Baldwin (1924-1987), Susan Sontag (1933-2004) and Gore Vidal (1925-2012). As Davidson shows, each of these figures negotiates self and text at a time when sexual categories are themselves in various stages of

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

re-definition and re-assessment. From the mid-Century forward, the increasing freedom to identify as homosexual, and the attendant diminishment of self-loathing enabled by collective identification with a newly visible subculture, changed the coordinates under which the work of Baldwin, Sontag and Vidal was promoted and received by various publics..

In seeming tension with the progressive liberationist arc that followed Stonewall is the wholesale rejection of sexual categorisation itself. As Davidson sets out, these writers' resistance to homosexual definition is not only a refusal of its particular limitations but of the prerogative of the sexual taxonomical system itself. If the homosexual is the categorical marker of sexuality then identification as homosexual is accompanied by the threat of becoming *only* sexual, or at least so it seemed to Baldwin, Sontag and Vidal as they navigated the world of literary celebrity. Furthermore, although sexuality was commonly deemed the most intimate and 'truest' aspect of identity, to make this aspect of the private self public was to risk losing interiority and to become only a public figure.

Davidson argues that the homosexual's status as an overdetermined marker on the chain that links interiority, sexuality and truth is intensified by the operations of celebrity cultures, including those of literary celebrity. While the distinction between public and private domains is crucial in this context—indeed the discourse of its distinction is fundamental to celebrity—the public/private binary constantly performs its own collapse. Davidson cites Richard deCordova's work on early twentieth-century film stardom as a complex relay between seemingly real and seemingly represented selves in which an actor's 'existence outside their work in film became the focus of discourse about them'. Instead of existing outside of the work, the 'private realm' becomes bifurcated so that the celebrity's sexual life comes to be 'constituted as a site of knowledge and truth' (80). This is the epistemology of truth as *alatheia* or unveiling, unconcealedness. For the queer celebrity this 'truth' is compounded by the revelation of homosexual particularity, which also represents, if ironically, the sexual category in 'essence'.

There are multiple implications of the breakdown of the private and public binary for queer celebrity. For one, the 'most private' realm of sex can become the most generic: the unconcealed condition yet another cloak of representation. Similarly, the division of the two primary categories, public and private, into three—public, private and sexual—overlays a binary logic with the inter-relationality and putative depth of the triad of superego, ego and id. As Davidson argues, these domains are ceaselessly interactive and queer celebrity frequently comprises the spectacle of their navigation and collapse. The alignments and misalignments between the binary and triadic systems performed by Baldwin, Sontag and Vidal are revelatory, not least for their connection to other key categories of identity such as gender, race and class.

Categorically Famous attends to the creative dilemmas and myriad contradictions of all three figures drawing out the paradoxes and parallelisms between them using the language of concealment and disclosure, presence and absence, avowal and denial, misalignments, inconsistencies, displacements, overdeterminations, reflexivities and intensities. Read together, and along the historical progression of liberationist activism pre- and post-Stonewall, the public careers of these three writers are testimony to the specific ingenuities by which queer lives and texts were invented and sustained. Moreover, Davidson argues that 'homosexuality actually was fundamental to the cultural shifts and the political effects collected under the differently weighted but overlapping rubrics of the "sexual revolution" and the "counterculture" of the (long) 1960s' (13).

Davidson turns first to James Baldwin and his complex negotiation of race and sex at the time of Black Power movement. In Baldwin's lifetime, the categories of 'negro' and homosexual

were both considered degenerate. As Davidson discusses in detail, Baldwin's texts repeatedly involve bodily expulsions characterised by abjection and shame. While Baldwin insistently identified as a 'negro' where many of his African-American contemporaries shunned the term as symptomatic of racism, he was vehement in his refusal to identify as a homosexual even though his sexual preference was public knowledge. For Baldwin, 'race' was a public matter and sexuality a private one. The complexity of Baldwin's position exposes the difficulty of a homosexual man becoming a representative of a racialised collective premised on explicit structures of patriarchy and progeneration, as shown by his vexed relationship with the Black Power movement. As Davidson points out, in order to adopt the roles of the 'Race man' and the civil rights activist, Baldwin had to deploy the language of the race-father.

The public/private distinction is further complicated in Baldwin's case by the parallel division between life and art. Baldwin's published fiction includes accounts of homosexual sex and of queer identity – that is, of the private self. However, his insistence on the privacy of his sexuality is an assertion of an impassable border between life and text. This view is, in part at least, in keeping with the dominance of the New Criticism movement in the United States, which espoused an understanding of literature as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The celebrity author exposes the artificiality of this reading practice in stark form. Nor is the proclaimed exclusivity of life and art equally weighted. As Sontag writes, you can't read the work through the life, but you can read the life through the work (73).

Sontag in the second subject of *Categorically Famous* and the juxtaposition of her career with Baldwin's is revealing. In a reversal of Baldwin's position, Sontag retained a privacy regarding her own sexuality for decades. Although one of her first major publications was *Notes on Camp* (1964), she did not out herself as 'bisexual' until 1995. The essay on camp, as Davidson argues, deflected the issue of personal identity onto the impersonality of her own critical style, which is devoid of the tenderness or playfulness identified as properties of camp. A resolutely non-performative text, *Notes on Camp* appears to stand apart from its subject rather than enter into it. Sontag's personal life also enforced the disconnection between the writer and her subject, as she was publicly identified as the divorced mother of a son. Sontag was also distanced from the subject of homosexuality by her gender – *Notes on Camp* is predominantly about male homosexuality – and by an analytical voice that is at odds with her gendered signature. Her assumption of gendered authority in her writing, which could have been read as a queer strategy, was viewed personally (at the time her writing was described as 'cold' and 'charmless') rather than categorically. Finally, the topic of a camp 'sensibility' chimed readily with a more general intellectual interest in culturally shared modes of apprehension, as can be seen in Northrop Frye's 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility' which was published in 1956, eight years before 'Notes on Camp' and 10 before her own essay on sensibility in *Against Interpretation*.

Davidson identifies a central paradox of Sontag – woman, writer and visual subject – as the simultaneous solicitation of 'eroticised audience attention while appearing to repel it' (73). This form of doubling, he argues, complicates accepted distinctions between literary celebrity and culture industry celebrity. As he writes, if Sontag is one of the 'celebrity writers who most easily invites comparison to movie stardom, she is also notable for the steadfastness with which she denied her own star status' (81). In so doing, she retains part of the authority that attached to literary celebrity from the eighteenth century forward—a lineage also important to Baldwin and Vidal. Unlike Baldwin and Vidal, however, who acknowledged their association with celebrity, Sontag is adamant in her refusal. This refusal is no doubt connected to the gendering of celebrity and authorship but is also a kind of ballast to Sontag's beauty and glamour. As

Davidson sets out compellingly, the photographic image of Sontag in circulation in the 1960s directly recalls the chiaroscuro of 1930s film star portraits including their ambiguous eroticisation. In Davidson's analysis these images sit alongside the prose to form a diptych that draws attention the ambivalent mesh of invitation and refusal at work within Sontag's sexualized style.

Davidson's third subject is Gore Vidal, whose rejection of the category of homosexual 'went hand in hand with his own sense of specialness.' Davidson cites Vidal's famous statement, 'All my life there was a category to which I was assigned. Well, I don't feel like a belong to any category' (125). This aversion did not, however, extend to the category of celebrity. Vidal frequently quipped that he was 'a third generation celebrity.' Interestingly, Davidson argues that Vidal's acceptance of the category of celebrity was due to his awareness of the queer affordances of celebrity culture rather than an indication of his egotism.

The chapters on Vidal concentrate on the cultural event that was *Myra Breckinbridge* (1968) and the way it 'prefigured or helped usher in gay liberation'. Davidson proposes that the satirical novel simultaneously stands apart from the gay liberationist movement and is immersed within it. In a parallel operation, *Myra* the novel and Myra the virtual celebrity 'enabled Vidal both to acknowledge his investment in same-sexuality and to deflect his connection to a rapidly consolidating an ever-more-visible gay identity' (128). As with Baldwin and Sontag, we once again see a complex and contradictory calibration of private and public domains, of sexuality, life and work, all of it set against the background of rapid historical change.

This doubleness or ambivalence is embedded in the Vidal's novel in which the transsexual heroine, Myra, is the object of the reader's fluctuating attachment and sympathy. Unlike Vidal, Myra suffers from what Davidson describes as an 'irony deficiency'. She is a camp object not a camp subject (130). Her adulation and emulation of 1940s Hollywood stars is a dramatic irony shared by the author and the reader but not the protagonist. But the greater irony, as Davidson sets out, is that the distance between Myra and Vidal collapses in key ways post-publication so that 'we often find Vidal iterating Myra's views rather than the other way round.' Queer life and queer art, or queer celebrity subject and celebrity text, are invariably entangled, and to less predictable effect than in their straight counterparts.

The three subjects of *Categorically Famous* each invent ways of living and writing in the public eye. One of the many achievements of this study is Davidson's tone of deep investment in historical events that is nonetheless dispassionate in its record of events and decisions. The effect is of a profound and enabling openness to contradiction. *Categorically Famous'* mode of reading is unparanoid, in Sedgwick's sense. It admits surprises and inconsistencies with interest and without anxiety. As we come to understand through reading this book, inconsistencies and misalignments were not only inevitable in the particular historical circumstances in which the three writers lived and worked, queer contradictions are integral to their originality and ongoing cultural significance. In its development of a distinctive, queer mode of analysis *Categorically Famous* offers a model of resolute openness, a liberatory methodology, and demonstrates its analytical and political potential.

Corresponding author: Elizabeth McMahon, School of the Arts and Media, University of New South Wales, e.mcmahon@unsw.edu.au

Elizabeth McMahon is the editor of *Southerly* magazine. She is the author of *Islands Identity and the Literary Imagination* (Anthem: 2016), which won two national awards. Her new monograph, *Transvestite Frontiers*, will come out with University of Sydney Press in 2021.