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point of view

Queer History/American History

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Queer History/American History

by [Vicki Eaklor](#)

As I wrote *Queer America* over the past few years my aim was to offer a thorough yet concise one-volume source for students, teachers, and anyone else seeking to learn something about the glbtq experience in the United States over the past one hundred years.

The need for the book grew out of my own teaching: some fifteen years earlier I had introduced the course "Gay American History" to the Alfred University curriculum and at first found it difficult to put together a reading list. Since then, as we know, the field of glbtq history has exploded, with hundreds of wonderful studies of individuals and movements, approaches and arguments, constantly causing me to reconsider the content and method of my course and my research.

However, two themes with which I began teaching remain the same and, if anything, have been magnified by writing the book: the sheer magnitude of our history—there is so much of it—and that the glbtq past, far from being "yet another history" is part and parcel of American history.

Given the way history is divided into fields it has been easy to accept the ghettoization developed since the 1960s, when the new social historians began restoring laborers, women, African Americans, Native Americans, and, of course, homosexual Americans, among others, to the "American story." Such was the force of traditional (white, male, privileged, presumably straight, political) history, though, that the full integration of "minority" histories has been slow, when accomplished at all.

The result is that the U. S. history most Americans learn still resembles less a rich stew of many elements than an elaborate meal of separate parts, most of which is "extra" and might be discarded in favor of the main course of the same old meat. It is time we resisted the impulse, and convenience, of this approach in favor of showing the interlocking nature of one history with another. Thus, I arrive at my argument that queer history is American history, and vice versa.

Queer history and the usual American saga are interdependent in several ways. Setting aside the obvious effects of U. S. history on queer people (told as eras of greater or lesser homophobia, with attendant policies against homosexuality), I will here focus briefly instead on the reverse—the impact of queer people and movements on U. S. history, and the centrality of gender as a uniting theme.

It should go without saying that of course glbtq people, visible or not, are part of the national story simply by virtue of being among "the American people"; we have served in the military in war and peace, have been in all labor forces, all movements for civil rights, in all political parties, and, at least in the case of James Buchanan (if not also Lincoln), may have lived in the White House.

Further, as Lillian Faderman argued brilliantly in *To Believe in Women*, it is not just the obvious presence of queer people that should be acknowledged, but the often crucial role we have played in some of the country's key events. (Faderman shows, for example, the centrality of lesbians to every major educational and social reform of the last 100 years.)

Additional examples of queer voices (explored further in my book) include those of the Harlem Renaissance and the development of the blues as an art form (Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey); the development of modern art and music (Andy Warhol, John Cage); uniquely American theater and music (Tennessee Williams, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein); and those



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that profoundly influenced the thought, literature, and activism of postwar civil rights and feminism (Bayard Rustin, Adrienne Rich, Rita Mae Brown).

In addition to modifying a traditional "famous names" history, though, queer history suggests that those events and movements specific to glbtq people are completely in line with the trajectory of U. S. history as it is often conceived: as a history of the gradual extension of civil rights (if not full equality) to an ever larger proportion of the population.

From our beginnings as a nation, when only white male property owners age 21 or older were full citizens, the ranks of potential voters expanded over two centuries, with those excluded from full social and economic participation repeatedly forming movements to demand their place. The result is an "identity politics" in which the very characteristics (race, religion, sex) used to justify discrimination become the basis for organizing groups to fight inequality.

Those termed homosexuals by the mid-twentieth century also began to think in those terms and organize as a political movement. In so doing, every group from the Mattachine Society of the 1950s and the picketers of the 1960s, to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force of the 1970s, the Human Rights Campaign of the 1980s, and GenderPac of the 1990s offers significant insights into the evolution of glbtq politics, and the politics of the nation as a whole.

Finally, any serious attempt to re-integrate queer people back into American history leads not only to a rethinking of what history is and why we study it, but all the while reminds us that any history omitting gender as a theme is incomplete.

At the very least, our national insistence on gender conformity (that one's assigned gender role conforms to one's sex) explains much about our history of homophobia, since gender and sexuality are so often conflated (the assumption that effeminate men and masculine women are also gay or lesbian).

Gender figures too into our economic and political histories. Can we really understand capitalism or militarism without noting that success in those areas has depended on a cult of masculinity?

Can we fully grasp the impact of the Cold War while omitting the mania over homosexual subversives that surpassed even the Red Scare, whether in Washington or in Hollywood?

These questions could be multiplied to include every era and event in our past, and the implied answer (no, in each case) opens up more lines of inquiry that can only enhance the understanding of our present as well as our past.

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Vicki L. Eaklor is Professor of History at Alfred University. She is a past chair of the Committee on Lesbian and Gay History, an affiliate of the American Historical Association. She has written extensively on sexuality and gender, especially as they intersect with politics and culture. Among her books is *Queer America: A GLBT History of the 20th Century*, which was published by Greenwood Press in March 2008.



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