Queer History, This: An American Synthesis

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Queer History, This: An American Synthesis
By Julie Prince

Exploring the roots of Queer history in America, this essay delves into the complexities of historical representations (or lack thereof) of this marginalized subculture.

With every passing month, new developments, for good or ill, reflect the political climate surrounding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) rights and presence in America. It is an election year, and ‘gay marriage’ is currently the hot issue on the tip of everyone’s tongue. Turn on your television set, and you are likely to see gay and lesbian comic ‘representations’ on nightly sitcoms and programs. Queer presence, it could be argued, is currently the most visible it has ever been. If this is true, the historical processes that have made it so appear to be absent from mainstream discourse. Further, if Queer visibility is at an all time peak, on whose terms does that visibility come? LGBT presence is nothing new in American society. Yet, while it might fleetingly dominate the front page of the newspaper, it is still almost completely absent from historical texts. How then does the current spotlight compare with the silent darkness of the past? As new legislation and new developments unfold around LGBT communities and issues, historians continue to dig through the dust of time to show that not only are queer communities here, they have been here…for a long, long time.

What we now call the United States has a very old, what we might now call ‘Queer’ history. Early explorer and trader Edwin T. Denig may have unwittingly described it best in 1833 when he wrote, “Strange country this, where males assume the dress and perform the duties of females, while women turn men and mate with their own sex!” (Roscoe, 2000, p.2). Denig was commenting on the social structure of the Crow Indians who, like many other Native American tribes, had third/fourth gender representations in their social groups. Long before Denig’s observation, early explorers had witnessed what came to be known as the berdache, or two-spirit people, who did not fit into a male/female gender construct in their societies (Eskridge, 1996, p.21). The berdache were given special status among their tribes and their presence, modern historians query, suggests a more fluid gender identity and diversity than the ‘heterosexual world’ that was to quickly become the norm with European colonization in the Americas. The berdache, along with the majority of Native peoples, were to become victim to the genocide and cultural obliteration of indigenous North America but their presence remains, reclaimed, in some circles despite their absence in History.

Decades later and among a very different social and ethnic group, white bourgeoisie women defied the prevalent heterosexual dominant norm in what we might call an early version of ‘gay marriage.’ In the 18th and early 19th centuries what came to be known as “Boston Marriages” appeared in urban centers. Women who for the first time had economic independence from men formed romantic friendships with other women and created lives together ((Eskridge, p.

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36). Boston Marriages enjoyed a significant degree of social acceptance for a time and are evidence that publicly recognized, committed same-sex partnerships are nothing ‘new’ in the US. They were even, in a small space, tolerated beside the heterosexual norm.

As the 19th century came to a close, new fields of ‘science’ were to emerge that would have lasting effect upon people who identified as having same sex love as well as people of color. Sexology and Eugenics, more entwined than one might assume, had oppressive and detrimental effects that are still present today. As ‘science’ spelled out norms for people to abide by, the space for Boston Marriages and other same sex couples was squashed. In parallel with scientific racism, the construction of the ‘homosexual’ occurred simultaneously with a renewed distinction between black and white ‘races’ (Somerville, 2000, p.16.) “All these models,” writes Siobhan B. Somerville, “constructed both the nonwhite body and the heterosexual body as pathological to greater or lesser extents” (p.17). Same sex sexuality, as well as being of color, was interpreted to be a physical defect or ‘abnormal’ characteristic and the result was catastrophic.

The norms that sexology and scientific racism were to put into place were to become the most significant forms of oppression and the key points of resistance for ‘queer’ people, people of color, and queer people of color in the 20th century. For those who were oriented towards members of their own sex, the title and trait of ‘inversion’ was attributed, making the assumption that these individuals were stunted in their personal development and needed medical help. World War II, mobilization, and organization were to be the ultimate factors in resistance to this ‘inversion’ theory and early organizing was to emerge in both political and social groups.

While credit is given, and much credit is due, to the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, early gay and lesbian rights groups, resistance to heterosexual norms was also found in queer social environments—primarily bars. San Francisco from the 1940s through the 1960s provides a good case example. Despite collusion of local police, the military, and the state authority, gay and lesbian bars were able to resist and keep their doors open to their patrons. The bar communities resisted repression and rejection of the concept of ‘inversion’ in several important ways. Working through legal channels, the Stoumen vs. Riley case in 1951 accorded gays and lesbians the right to congregate, a right previously denied (Boyd, 2003, p.122). Sol Stoumen, owner of the Black Cat Bar, had his liquor license revoked for providing a meeting space for ‘homosexuals.’ Through court challenge, he gained an important civil right for lesbian and gay communities out of resistance that was not overtly ‘political’ so much as out of saving the bar space (p. 123). The very existence of the bars was a form of resistance as well, for they provided a place for people to be different and did not hold patrons to heterosexual social norms. It was in the bar space, as much as in the political arena, that queer culture emerged.

Early gay and lesbian political organizing focused on Civil Rights and social acceptance for lesbians and gay men in society. Viewed in a modern context as having assimilationist strategies, members of early political groups took considerable risk in identifying with and organizing around these issues. The Mat-
machine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis were to lay the foundation for LGBT activism in the decades to come, and were instrumental in opening up an alternative political and social space for some LGBT communities. However, differences of race, class, and gender continued to be divisive elements in queer organizing. It was not until the late 1960s that resistance to these linked oppressions was to emerge.

In the United States, the 1960s is known as a decade of social unrest and the Civil Rights movement highlighted in Dr. Martin Luther King, Vietnam protests, rioting across the nation and, less well remembered, the Stonewall incident. What the history textbooks do not portray around the protests of the 1960s was how divided Americans really were. While the organizing of the era was often issue specific and is presented in an oversimplified manner as black vs. white, straight vs. gay, pro-war vs. anti-war, in reality these oppressive paradigms and many more were present in Civil Rights struggles. Bayard Rustin, one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s most significant political organizers (March on Washington) and right hand man, was gay- and he was out (D’Emilio 80). Bayard Rustin, however, is not in textbooks. King distanced himself from Rustin when an accusation was made that he, too, was gay and rather than defend and publicly accept Rustin for who and what he was, King and the movement left Bayard Rustin behind. In this instance, as in many, the fight for equality did not always involve equity and the struggle for LGBT rights was overlooked or viewed as a threat to larger movements. In this decade of struggle LGBT activism was to emerge at last, on its own terms.

The small riot at the illegal New York City gay bar, Stonewall Inn, was to have a huge effect upon LGBT organizing and the Movement in 1969. A common rumor that John D’Emilio refutes in Stonewall: Myth and Meaning is that “Stonewall Started Everything.” Stonewall, while significant, occurred after decades of struggle in the bars and after the groundbreaking work of early organizing groups. The role that Stonewall played was that of a catalyst. Post-Stonewall, thousands of LGBT groups emerged and assimilation was no longer the struggle. Revolution took its place. Queer liberation theories emerged as manifesto/as were written across the US attacking the institutions of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism for perpetuating heterosexist oppression. A kind of gay liberation had begun.

With LGBT movements becoming more visible, so too was resistance and opposition. Visibility makes one…visible…and in some ways, more vulnerable. Harvey Milk, one of the first publicly gay men to hold political office, was voted a San Francisco City Supervisor in 1977 representing the Castro district and surrounding areas (Boyd, p.179). It was a cause for celebration. When he was murdered one year later by Dan White, a fellow City Supervisor, the reality of hate inspired crime intensified the tragedy. Harvey Milk meant many things to many people. The brutal loss was the result of violence that has been a reality for thousands of declared lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people who have been victims of hate crimes. Visibility has come at a cost and it is a struggle on going.

In the 1980s, LGBT organizing took on an urgency that no one could have predicted. Thanks to the work of so many who had gone before there was
finally a community to be part of that was to become very important as the AIDS crisis hit. In 1981, a so-called ‘gay cancer’ emerged that was come be known as HIV/AIDS. Early cases reported affected mostly gay men, and little serious action was taken to address the rapidly spreading infection. In fact, AIDS was completely ignored by the Reagan Administration in public discourse until 1987, when Reagan first said the word “AIDS” out loud. Over 40,000 people had died and another 70,000 were infected with HIV/AIDS at that point (AEGIS, 2004). HIV/AIDS, while not by any means an exclusively ‘gay’ problem, was ignored by a political and economic system that could afford to ignore the issue, as those affected were people without power. As LGBT communities came together to break the silence around HIV/AIDS, increased momentum for political action and political mobilization began.

In the 1990’s increased awareness and funding for HIV/AIDS prevention put the epidemic into the spotlight. But now, a decade later, those funds are drying up. There is still no cure or vaccination although advancements have been made and it is now quite possible to live, well, with HIV. However, access to retroviral drugs remains limited and so the HIV/AIDS epidemic has ironically taken on race and class dimensions likewise ignored as unimportant by the US political and economic system.

Open a textbook and you might find a snippet about Stonewall here or a brief mention of HIV/AIDS and gay men there. In that textbook, you will not find the stories of same-sex couples who lived here before European ships landed, cross-dressers who participated in the Revolutionary War, Boston Marriages, or Bayard Rustin. Open a newspaper and you might see an article on a current issue affecting the LGBT community, turn on the TV and you will probably see LGBT people misrepresented. Despite the current visibility around current issues, the historical presence and the historical framework upon which those current issues rest continue to remain excluded. What does it portend to have presence in the present but no representation in the past? Mainstream America may become more comfortable slowly letting some LGBT members in, within the context of “they’re just like us.” But how many people and how much of history will continue to be left out? The past can provide the roots, origin, and validation of a community. Yet history, and the men who write it, have left so much out. As people continue to reclaim lost identities and stolen liberties, new pages of a very old past are written. Those who have been marginalized for so long emerge out of the darkness, into the light.

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