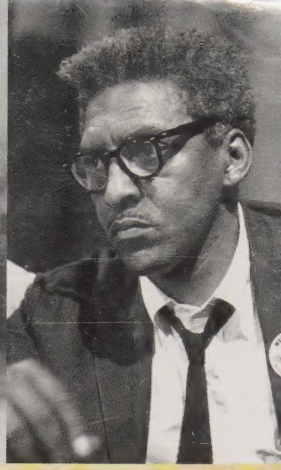
History.2: Gay American History | The 2025 Ralph Janis Seminar in History
Faculty: Dr. Sara Warner, Director of LGBT Studies and Associate Professor of Performing & Media Arts
Week Two: July 13 – 19, 2025
Schedule: Monday - Friday, 9-12 and 1:30-3:30, except Wednesday afternoon.
Location: On campus, classroom KEND 103



A QUEER HISTORY of the UNITED STATES

MICHAEL BRONSKI


"Bronski does a stunning job of sweeping across five hundred years and weaving 'queer' through the history of this nation. Always insightful, and provocative."

—**John D'Emilio**, author of *Lost Prophet*

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, when I first began teaching lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies at Dartmouth College, I was invited to a fraternity house to moderate a group discussion titled "Don't Yell Fag from the Porch." The frat was renowned for its rowdiness, and indeed, someone had recently yelled "faggot" at a student passing by—undoubtedly not for the first time. After being publicly challenged on this behavior, the frat brothers decided to host a public forum on homophobia in the Greek system. The discussion went well and became an annual event. "Faggot" was yelled with less frequency, and in a few years the fraternity even had a few "out" gay members. But that evening, and over the years, what bothered me was that the entire discussion was predicated on the idea that Dartmouth College was essentially a straight place that had to be open to "gay people." But that makes no sense. We all know that life—and history—is far more complex than that. Or do we?

All too often most of us think in terms of simple dichotomies, including gay and straight; but who might answer to the call of "fag" when its history has been shown to be more than a simple either/or question? Here are a few lines from a letter Daniel Webster, a Dartmouth alumnus and hero to the college, wrote in 1804 at the age of twenty-two to the twenty-three-year-old James Hervey Bingham, his intimate from their college days: "I don't see how I can live any longer without having a friend near me, I mean a male friend. Yes, James, I must come; we will yoke together again; your little bed is just wide enough." Was Daniel Webster gay? Did he love James? Did they have a sexual relationship? If so, what did this mean for his two marriages later in life? Is this queer history?

The last ten years of teaching LGBT studies has for me been a continual process of trying to figure out what is LGBT history. How

do we understand it? How do we use it to think about the past? How do we use it to think about the present and the future? I certainly would have liked to quote Webster's words while moderating "Don't Yell Fag from the Porch." What would the students have thought about Webster's obsessive desire to lie in bed with his friend James once again and hold him fast to his body? Or what if I had told them that poet Richard Hovey, who wrote the lyrics to the school's "Alma Mater," was also a lover of men, and although married and an ardent feminist, socialized in gay male circles in America and Europe? (Oscar Wilde once famously hit on him at a party.) Would it have been another reason for their not shouting "faggot" as frequently? Would this have "queered" Dartmouth for them? One of the reasons for titling this book *A Queer History of the United States* is an attempt to "queer" how we think about American history.

The questions of this book are much larger than who might have been "gay" in the past or had sexual relations with their own sex. Over the past forty years a great deal of incredible scholarship on LGBT history has been written, and I have drawn extensively upon it, rethought it, and synthesized it here. What follows is a long meditation on not only LGBT history but, because it is inseparable, all of American history. After two years of thinking and writing, I want to start by suggesting that there are two crucial concepts to consider when examining LGBT history in the United States.

The first is that the contributions of people whom we may now identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are integral and central to how we conceptualize our national history. Without the work of social activists, thinkers, writers, and artists such as We'Wha, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Martha "Calamity" Jane Cannary Burke, Edith Guerrier, Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Bayard Rustin, Roy Cohn, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cherrie Moraga, and Lily Tomlin, we would not have the country that we have today. Women and men who experienced and expressed sexual desires for their own sex and those who did not conform to conventional gender expectations have always been present, in both the everyday and the imaginative life of our country. They have profoundly helped shape it, and it is inconceivable, and ahistorical, to conceptualize our traditions and history without them.

The second, and slightly counterintuitive, key concept is that LGBT history does not exist. By singling out LGBT people and their lives, we are depriving them of their centrality in the broader sweep and breadth of American history. The impulse to focus on lives that have been shunned, marginalized, censored, ignored, and hidden in the past—and in previous histories of the United States—has been revolutionary in the growth of a vibrant LGBT community. This impulse is part of a larger social and political movement of Native American, African American, Latino/Latina, and other marginalized identities and cultures to reclaim and celebrate our "lost" histories. (Although as an identity, LGBT has, as we will see, a much newer history than other identities.) But it is equally important to understand that this is a transitional moment in history that has emerged in the past forty years precisely because those marginalized groups were so deeply dismissed.

If LGBT history resides in the queer space of being both enormously vital and nonexistent, can we even write and speak about it? How do we uncover and explicate the past so that it brings new understandings to popular culture and scholarly pursuits alike? How will this history resonate with our understanding of our own contemporary and historic lives?

We have been taught, in our nation's fairly unimaginative educational system, that history is a stable linear narrative with a fixed set of facts—names, dates, political actions, political ideas, laws passed and repealed. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, a groundbreaking book of radical feminist theory, Shulamith Firestone writes that this conventional way of understanding the historical process as a series of snapshots—here is the American Revolution, here is the Declaration of Independence, here is the Emancipation Proclamation—is limiting and ultimately unhelpful. History, she states (drawing loosely on Marxist theory), is "the world as process, a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites yet inseparable and interpenetrating . . . history as movie rather than as snapshot."

Much of the popular LGBT history that has been published in our newspapers, magazines, and blogs falls into the category that Firestone criticizes. It is essentially a list of famous lesbian or gay people and events used to justify contemporary understandings—

here is Oscar Wilde, here are the Stonewall Riots, here are queer couples being married in Boston. This family album approach is appealing, because it provides a sense of identity and history, but it is ultimately misleading. In past decades women's and gender studies scholars called this method of analysis "add one woman and stir." The "important" women were added to the mix to create a gender balance, but there were no new layers of complexity or nuance as to what these women's lives, thoughts, desires, and actions might actually mean for a shared historical past.

More serious writing on LGBT history has avoided this approach. Historians such as Jonathan Ned Katz, Lillian Faderman, Allan Bérubé, George Chauncey, and Esther Newton, among many others, have examined how LGBT history complicates and enriches the American imagination and the national story we already know. I have drawn extensively on these writers, and many other sources, to present a daringly complex vision of the past, one that forces a fundamental rethinking of what we thought we knew, as well as of the present and even the future. Its broad use of facts, historic personalities, and events is an invitation to join in a larger intellectual project of reinterpretation. As Firestone argues, history is a movie—not a Hollywood film with a traditional narrative, but rather an experimental film that presents a reality that makes sense only when we appreciate its intrinsic narrative complexity. History is an ongoing process through which we understand and define ourselves and our lives.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

We cannot understand history or know what it means to us today without first understanding the process by which it is written. The writing and reading of history is always, consciously or not, a political act of interpretation. The political, intellectual, and social conditions of a particular time period affect who is writing, what they are writing, and why they are writing. The writer must construct a narrative that makes sense for her or his present social and cultural context, as well as contextualize that narrative in a broader

historical framework. This process depends on the availability of both historical facts and language that can convey a clear, precise understanding of the facts and their context.

While the contemporary project of writing LGBT history began in earnest during the gay liberation movement of the early 1970s, previous writers penned what might be seen as early attempts to construct histories of people with same-sex desires. Plato's mythical analysis, in his *Symposium*, of why some people were sexually attracted to their own sex had an enormous effect on how other writers in the Western tradition conceptualized same-sex desire. Some historians of the classical period—Plutarch in his *Lives* and Suetonius in *The Twelve Caesars*, for example—were interested in chronicling the same-sex desires of notable men. Vasari, in his 1550 *Lives of the Painters*, hints at the same-sex desires of Michelangelo and other Renaissance artists. While these works did not focus strictly on homosexual activity, they did not avoid or hide it. In the mid to late nineteenth century, two social and legal reformers—Karl-Maria Kertbeny, an Austrian-born Hungarian, and Karl Ulrichs of Germany—separately wrote articles, pamphlets, and books about same-sex behavior, as did John Addington Symonds, an English art historian. All three drew upon notable figures of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance to prove that there was a centuries-old tradition of same-sex behaviors. Their works sought to make a case for both the naturalness of same-sex desire and the reformation of laws that criminalized homosexual behavior.

These works are clearly contextualized by their times. Plutarch and Suetonius present the little data they have—some of it gossip—nonjudgmentally. While not particularly naming same-sex activity, they describe it as a facet of human activity. This is also true of Vasari, but he is more coded, since by the Renaissance homosexual activity was branded a grave sin and a serious crime by the Roman Catholic Church. These writers were also limited by writing about people and events very close to their own times. This type of historical project—like writing about a recent presidential administration—has clear boundaries for access to materials. Kertbeny, Ulrichs, and Symonds took a different approach. They cautiously, but quite consciously, drew upon a far wider range of materials,

including recent historical research, advances in archaeology, and scholarly reconstructions of past literatures. Their class and educational backgrounds gave them the necessary social and political access to write and disseminate their ideas.

Each of these historical works is as much a portrait of the time in which it was written as it is a narrative of the past. Each was written to make emotional and psychological sense to its contemporary readers. Plutarch and Suetonius were interested in exposing the political and psychological foibles of their subjects. Varsari was trying to "explain" as best he could the social and emotional relationship of Renaissance artists to their audience and to a hierarchy of patronage that funded and controlled their work. While these three writers had definite points of view—we could fairly call them political and social "agendas"—Kertbeny, Ulrichs, and Symonds were making a clear, unequivocal case for the cultural and legal acceptance of same-sex desire and activity. Post-Enlightenment German and British cultures were progressive enough to allow such ideas to circulate, albeit in a limited sphere.

Existing terminology, like the larger cultural context, limits the scope of what writers are able to say. Religious terms that described same-sex activity as sinful, such as "sodomite," were in common use in Europe and England from the late thirteenth century. Sexual offenses, especially homosexual behavior, were often referred to in canon law and civil codes with the elliptical terms "crimes against nature" or "the unmentionable vice," thus emphasizing that such actions were so aberrant as to be literally unspeakable. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, the term "catamite"—a corruption of Ganymead, the boy lover and cup bearer for Zeus in Greek mythology—was used, usually negatively, to describe men who had sex with men. In eighteenth-century Great Britain, "molly" was used so frequently to describe men, often gender deviant, who desired other men that the private homes or tavern rooms in which they congregated were called Molly Houses.

The rise of capitalism in Europe and the strong influence of individuality within post-Reformation Protestantism gave rise to a new cultural notion: self-identity that was specific to an individual but associated with a larger group. Ulrichs began using "urning," a term

he borrowed from Plato's *Symposium*, as well as "invert," which connoted a person who possessed the soul of the other sex, to refer to people who experienced same-sex attraction in a nonjudgmental way. Kertbeny invented the word "homosexual" in 1869 to help him construct a narrative around a person defined by his or her same-sex sexual desires and actions. Beginning in the late nineteenth century in Europe and Great Britain, "sapphist," from the Greek poet Sappho, was used occasionally to describe women who loved women, and the practice was referred to as "sapphism." The word "lesbian," referring to the Isle of Lesbos, the home of Sappho, was first used by sexologist Havelock Ellis in 1897. Until fifty years ago, it was common for lay people, journalists, and social scientists to use "invert" along with "homosexual."

In the twentieth century, we have become accustomed to a far wider range of words for an ever-growing number of public and private identities. "Queer," originally meaning "odd" or "quaint," acquired the meaning of "bad" and "worthless" in the early eighteenth century. Since the 1920s, mainstream British and U.S. vernacular has used "queer" negatively to describe homosexuals, although within the homosexual community it was always a purely descriptive term. "Faggot," "dyke," and "gay" came into usage in the United States in the 1930s. The two former words had negative mainstream connotations, and the latter was used only within the homosexual community until the 1970s, when it gained more mainstream acceptance. In a process of taking community control of language, "fag" and "dyke" eventually became acceptable terms used by LGBT people. The naming of the first national post–gay liberation gay male publication, Boston-based *Fag Rag*, started in 1970, was a political move to expressly challenge linguistic suppositions. The same was true of *Dyke*, a short-lived New York–based lesbian publication from the mid-1970s. In the late 1990s, the grassroots political action group Queer Nation popularized the reclaimed "queer" so successfully that within a few years, national television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* used the word without offense. Today we routinely use LGBT, a fairly recent, and accepted, amalgamation of identities, each of which has a specific history that often had little to do with the others.

WHAT HISTORY TEACHES

While language informs identity, the elaborate emotional, psychological, and political intricacies of lives exceed identity, and even language itself. There is never a perfect word or set of words to fully understand oneself. Suetonious writes that Emperor Tiberius would bathe in a deep pool and have young boys, whom he called his "minnows," swim between his legs and nip at his genitals. Plato may have considered himself a pederast, that is, a teacher and lover of boys and young men. Michelangelo may have thought himself a sodomite. Joan of Arc certainly saw herself as a divinely inspired savior of France who needed to wear soldier's garments and gear in order to defeat the British. Emily Dickinson may have thought of herself as just a woman who had affectionate and sexual feelings for other women. Virginia Woolf, who never actually named her own sexuality, did use the word "sapphist" in her writing; it is reasonable to think that this may have been a label she entertained for herself. I have been as linguistically accurate as possible when writing this book, but language is both an entryway and a dead end.

The same is true of the word "sexuality," the main topic of this book. I use this word as expansively as possible, like the words "queer" and "gay." Here "sexuality" connotes the never-ending constellation of factors that inform how people understand their sexual desires and actions. My use of the term is meant to connect the present with the past so that we can better understand both. Whatever sexuality means today and did not mean before, the word, like others before it, has always attempted to describe something we know is not reducible to a word, an identity, or even a set of behaviors.

Interpretations are best made with the long view in mind. They allow us to recognize the significance of what on the surface might have nothing to do with being LGBT. Of the many trends, similarities, and repeated occurrences throughout this book, I have found three that struck me as crucial in understanding the most important historical developments for LGBT people in the past five hundred years. Some of these surprised me; others reconfirmed what I already suspected.

Perhaps the most startling revelation, which did not occur to me until I had finished writing, was that many of the most important changes for LGBT people in the past five hundred years have been a result of war. From the American Revolution to the war in Vietnam, wars have radically affected LGBT people and lives. These wars have had an enormous impact on all Americans, but their effects on LGBT people have been particularly pronounced, in part because the social violence of war affects sexuality and gender.

The second realization was that entertainment in its broadest sense—popular ballads, vaudeville, films, sculptures, plays, paintings, pornography, pulp novels—has not only been a primary mode of expression of LGBT identity, but one of the most effective means of social change. Ironically, the enormous political power of these forms was often understood by the people who wanted to ban them, not by the people who were simply enjoying them.

One of the most salient themes here is the battle between the social purity movements (which began in the nineteenth century and have numerous descendants) and the right of LGBT people, and all Americans, to decide how to use their imaginations and bodies. This has always been a tension in American life, but the circumstances of the nineteenth century institutionalized it. This tension remains with us today.

This history is told chronologically, beginning just before Columbus in 1492. I end the main narrative with the AIDS activism of ACT UP in the late 1980s. The story I tell covers five hundred years, and obviously much is left out, although some surprising details are included. My intention is to tell the story of this country through the lens of the multitudes of LGBT individuals and experiences. I hope to give a secure and realistic sense of how the lives, thoughts, and actions of LGBT people have made this nation into the country it is today, and show all non-LGBT people how this history has affected them as well. I believe it is the only way to honor both LGBT people and the nation to which they have contributed so mightily, even as that political entity often treats them with grave disrespect and harm. The heritage of LGBT people is the heritage of Americans.

This book is titled *A Queer History of the United States*. But by beginning the story in 1492, I am really writing about America, an

entity that existed centuries before the political entity of the United States was conceived and that continues today independent of the Republic. "America" is a mythical entity that has no boundaries. "America" is what people imagine it to be, as well as what people have made it.

Gertrude Stein, the mother of all queer wit, begins her novel *The Making of Americans* with the epigram, "Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches." Stein's recitation speaks to the intrinsic nature of my project. History teaches something new every time it is rewritten or interpreted. Pedagogy, like history, will never be able to contain all of America—a great country, an evil country, a place of tremendous generosity and welcome as well as pronounced disdain for foreigners and outsiders. America is not one thing or another. America is queer. *A Queer History of the United States* is one explanation of how it got that way. To become American, to benefit from the contributions of LGBT people to this fabulous, horrible, scary, and wonderful country we call America, is to be a little queer. As history teaches, America only gets queerer.