

Where Are We to Begin?

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“THE problem is still at root the same,” Alan Bray surmised in 1982: “Where are we to begin?” This question has pestered historians of sexuality, whether writing about twentieth-century America or, as Bray was, Renaissance England. Do we write a history of homosexuality, lesbian and gay history, or queer history? From the very start, we shape the past as we set the parameters of inquiry. We create boundaries that not only exclude some historical figures and events but also alienate many of today’s readers. We privilege certain prior thoughts and acts over others, thereby giving primacy to seemingly related iterations in contemporary culture. Where, for example, does the category of gender or the transgendered person fit into these histories? As we assess what might still be called a minority history (or histories, plural), we participate in the making of majorities and minorities. Therefore, we must be careful when we ask, Who or what are we interested in studying?

Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender persons, straights. Today, much disagreement can be found over the very definitions of these (limited and limiting) categories, if assessed in any depth. If the identities or self-conceptions that these labels denote prove varied and elastic from one person to the next, then the widely acknowledged desires and behaviors that, in part, tend to constitute them likewise carry divergent meanings. In these regards, *we are diferent* one from another; in these matters, *we difer* with one another. If today we differ, what about differences across time, in the past? Can we understand them? Even if we try, we must ask, again, where are we to begin?

First, I propose as a historian that we consider where we have been. Specifically, I’d like to offer the briefest account of academe’s engagements over the last several years with sexuality. Thereby, implicitly, I hope to characterize the ground covered by this current collection and its impressive assembly of authors. I don’t propose a definitive assessment of the field or historical subfield, so far as such a field can be said to exist; given the infinite perspectives that animate this subject area, I’ll stop short of attempting to answer the provocative question posed so thoughtfully by Viclu Eaklor in this volume’s conclusion: Where are we now? I trust, further, that the thorough, practical, and ultimately workable guidelines that this volume’s editor, Allida Black, set out will require little elaboration. From the thicket of

complex American queer historical endeavor, she has pulled together a user-friendly, conceptually fundamental set of essays for use by university faculty, college students, and everyday readers. The essays speak—and speak well—for themselves. Finally, I'll sidestep the yet more difficult question: Where are we going? I'll forego millennial prognostications, but instead suggest a set of concerns that I hope will inform historians, writers, and readers alike as they, and as we, seek understanding and, most importantly, justice in our future encounters with the past—that is, in our futures.

The Queer Studies Pioneer Narrative

I find myself complicit in an emergent genre of scholarly writing: the queer studies pioneer narrative. My colleagues and I, ostensibly atomized on hostile campuses across the globe, have been telling our stories of individual struggle, triumph over adversity, as we detail our successes in offering the first course in queer studies at our respective universities, in uncovering the first cache of queer archival materials on a particular topic, or in writing the first scholarly volume on this or that queer subject. There are problems in these self-congratulatory epistles.

Relying on poststructuralist and feminist rationales, the queer studies pioneer narrative is a positioned work of personal writing, a first-person account of firsts, that recirculates dominant notions of individualism and effaces the collective nature of political struggle. Exacerbated by entrenched reward systems within academe, it celebrates the path-breaking, the carving out of a niche, and thereby hinders coalition. Ahistorical in nature, it expunges queer studies predecessors and reinscribes progressivist ideas about change; in essence, it reinstates the “repressive hypothesis” that theorist Michel Foucault debunked. We are getting better and better, it implies. Historically squelched, the speaking about and studying of sexuality are now becoming freer and freer.

In reflecting on my own narratives and those of other queer historians and theorists, I see the need for a group dialectic that goes beyond the disciplines and even beyond interdisciplinary understandings and institutional structures, since this language has also been heard under race and ethnic studies and women's studies rubrics. I suggest that we teachers and students, as well as nonacademicians, de-center traditional pedagogical strategies in an effort to acknowledge and foster cocurricular and extracurricular linkages. Further, I urge us to reconsider the ways in which we privilege the institution of higher learning as a locus of social change. As we envision insurgent tactics within pervasive systems of oppression, we must historicize and contextualize today's queer academic endeavor as but a *part* of multiple resistances to be found in unpredictable places and times.

The queer studies pioneer narrative reached its zenith—or, depending on how you look at it, its nadir—at the 1997 annual meeting of the Modern Languages Association. Four scholars shared their stories on a Gay and Lesbian Caucus panel

entitled “Voices in the Wilderness: Teaching Queer Studies in Strange Places.” Strange places, it seems, are those located outside New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. They include Catholic liberal arts colleges and state universities situated in the exoticized American South, where I taught for almost a decade.

At the conference, an associate professor of English from Texas described her “long and arduous process of establishing a gay and lesbian literature course at . . . a formerly all-male military college that did not admit women . . . until 1967.” Her paper’s title: “Reconstructing Homophobia in the Bible Belt, or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Rednecks.” Lengthy, cutesy titles by scholars lamenting their lot in the South—and thereby positioning themselves above or beyond perceived local ideologies—would seem by now clichéd, indeed formulaic. (A more recent example by a scholar in north Florida: “What the South Needs: Suggestions and Observations of One Queer Southerner, or How a Hypocritical Military Haircut and a Letter to the Editor of the *New Yorker* Make Life in Pensacola Possible.”) Similar to the Texan’s narrative, an assistant professor in his first-person account of teaching queer literature at the University of South Carolina (USC) reported that he was “subjected to repeated attacks in the campus right-wing press”—attacks that were “characterized by unnerving personal animosity . . . [and] regional inflections of homophobia” (emphasis added). “The student writer,” he continued, “published my home address and urged students to confront me there.”

While I don’t want to diminish any scholar’s very real and very serious experiences of homophobic vitriol and harassment, I do want to point up the utilitarian value of such attacks as the USC professor invokes them, the ways in which they sustain and even legitimize queer scholars. As the old saying goes, “There’s honor in having certain individuals as enemies.” Indeed, if reactionary student newspapers such as the *Dartmouth Review* or *Duke Review* attack a faculty member, many will rally to that scholar’s cause. But the isolationism that many queer studies scholars seem to take on has often been unnecessary, if not disingenuous and counterproductive. At the very same university in South Carolina, a colleague on the education faculty used his actual and reinvented persecution to great effect. His personal web site declared, “Welcome to the home page of a gay educator, author, activist, and [as if to dispel questions of authenticity occasioned by his Indiana upbringing] Southerner. Yes I am the person who Pat Robertson lambasted on the 700 Club as ‘Satan of the University,’ the professor *Out Magazine* championed as ‘Dr. Sodomite.’”

Such statements, of course, must be understood in light of a broader academic context that fosters self-promotion and encourages the individuation of discrete scholars and their projects. But while the Texan, at a mammoth state school of some forty-three thousand students, insisted that her only allies were straight, liberal faculty who were “themselves . . . interpersonally homophobic,” didn’t the two faculty members at the University of South Carolina at least know one another? Can we legitimately assume, as these scholars suggested, that they were going it

alone in crafting queer curricula? And if so, need they have been? Most incredibly, why were they not in league with queer students and student organizations? Indeed, who was taking these classes, anyway? Didn't the students' numbers, their voices, figure into administration decision-making?

As much as we queer scholars like to or are encouraged to present ourselves as pioneers, such assertions obfuscate the queer collective action that historically has enabled our very existence, our presence on campus, our publications, and our preening at academic conferences. Let me assure you, I'm not immune to this. Up until very recently, my bio bragged of several firsts. For one, I billed myself as the first scholar—along with my colleague Rose Gladney—to (co)teach a course in lesbian and gay studies at the University of Alabama. This statement was not based on any research into prior university catalogues or curriculum committee minutes. It was based solely on conjecture. Surely, I assumed, patting myself on the back, no one had dared teach such a course in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, prior to my time there.

But even then, in 1992, I harbored some nagging suspicions. Rose, not given to bravado, gently pointed me to the lesbian content in many women's studies courses at the University of Alabama. Too, I had a vague knowledge of the irrepressible Louie Crew. Crew certainly had taught queer material at the university. Under his editorship there, *College English*—the official journal of the National Council of Teachers of English—published in 1974 an entire quarterly issue on the topic of “The Homosexual Imagination.” Crew soon afterward took a position at Fort Valley State College in no stranger a place than Fort Valley, Georgia—where, his bio proclaimed, he was married to his male partner.

I even recently took to crediting myself with publishing the first history of lesbian and gay Southerners, partly as a way to distinguish myself from one of the aforementioned USC scholars. Technically, the statement was true. But of what use was such information? Perhaps tenure review committees might one day be impressed, but I surely didn't endear myself to queer activists throughout the South who had long written their own memoirs, biographies, and histories—without the support of institutions like Duke University, but with mimeographed copy and grassroots distribution systems.

But then again, I'm at least in esteemed company. I noticed recently a big boast by Eve Sedgwick, the “soft-spoken queen of gay studies,” as referred to by *Rolling Stone* and as cited, in turn, on the back cover of a recent tome. In a *New York Times Book Review* advertisement placed by the Association of American University Presses, Sedgwick said:

When I showed a queer studies manuscript to a university press [editor] in 1983, he said, “You know you're crazy, don't you?” But he published it anyway. It's only university presses that can nourish the minds of five or ten thousand readers at a time, and keep challenging books in print long enough to become a useable part of the way people think.

Actually, by 1983, a number of queer titles had been published by university presses, notably John Boswell's powerful *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* and John D'Emilio's indispensable *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. Indeed, Boswell's and D'Emilio's editor at the University of Chicago Press, Doug Mitchell—long credited with fostering queer scholarship—was recently acknowledged with a lifetime service award from the Lambda Literary Foundation.

And contrary to Sedgwick's thesis, before university presses jumped on the bandwagon, small independent presses were putting out the best scholarly history, notably Jonathan Ned Katz's *Gay American History*, published by Thomas Crowell in 1976; the best sociology, including Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, published by Aldine in 1970; and certainly the best if not the only works on queers of color, most notably Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back*, published first in 1981 by Persephone and thereafter by Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press.

As Saralyn Chesnut and Amanda Gable have demonstrated in their compelling analysis of 1970s lesbian-feminist writing, independent publishing houses and the bookstores that sold their works were collective endeavors, antithetical to academic individualism. Lesbian-feminist bookstores, where lesbian scholarship flourished, were more than intellectual enclaves or even community centers. They were multifaceted loci of families and friends, texts and images, thoughts and ideas, reflecting local neighborhoods and communities in flux but also in solidarity.

Similarly, campus environments supportive of queer studies are never the product of a lone wolf. Queer studies courses emerged on the heels of queer student groups, which beginning in the 1960s waged battles in the courts for their right to exist. And they continue to battle for their fair share of student fees and access to university meeting space, as we know from a recent federal case out of Alabama. These students, you readers, fill and sustain queer studies classes, and yet these campus courses do not and cannot exist apart from broader struggles for queer equal rights. The American homophile movement of the 1950s predated and enabled the movement for queer curricula in academe. One popular history lists the first departmentally approved "homophile studies" course as being offered in 1970 at—would you have guessed it?—the University of Nebraska. Another public history project points to a course from 1970 at the University of Kentucky.

Among a long, pernicious tradition of American pioneer mythology, this particular evocation of the pioneer metaphor is perhaps useful only to the extent that it reveals the insidious assumptions of these queer tales. The queer studies pioneer narrative reflects a slash-and-burn policy that callously disregards predecessors, that trounces over territory marked by prior claims, that asserts bald individualism made possible by foregoing collective action. Underneath these heroics, the reality is a sober one. Failure to build coalition—with students and student groups, new lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) resource centers housed within student

affairs divisions, neighboring community activists, and large-scale movements for social change—will only endanger the scholar-activist’s ability to effect change. It will threaten the very safety and solace of the life of the mind seemingly predicated on solitude, whether in Alabama and Nebraska, or strange places like New York and Los Angeles.

Future Histories

The position of queer studies is far from secure. Despite increasing numbers of course offerings, collective endeavor proves difficult. Would that we were as organized as the National Association of Scholars (NAS) thinks. In my first semester at Duke University—a reputed bastion of subversive queer pedagogy—during the winter of 1996-97, it was a full month before I realized that on our little campus of six thousand undergraduates, at least three of us adjunct faculty members were teaching queer courses, however defined. We had not coordinated class meeting times, compared syllabi for overlap, or even met one another.

One of those instructors marveled at the large enrollment his class generated; that is, until he discovered that six of his students had assumed that “GLB Cultural Studies” referred to “Global Cultural Studies.” Would that our courses enticed unsuspecting, wayward students in droves as the NAS fears. And yet, perhaps a lesson in recruitment is to be learned here. Of those six students, four remained in the class.

Meanwhile, zealously committed to full disclosure, I offered a special topics course with the out title, appearing on each student’s transcript, of “American Lesbian and Gay History.” Made fully aware of that on the first day of class, one of my six registrants failed to return, leaving me with five. Fortunately for my standing in the department, my course the following semester—a broader regional history that included within its well-advertised, revisionist critique a significant queer component—was overenrolled.

This brings us to a central dilemma posed by queer pedagogy: to teach queer history or to queer the teaching of history. Answers lie not solely or even primarily in the ability to draw large, engaged audiences. Rather, I would suggest that they lie in the ability to engage audiences in the theoretical exercise of destabilizing present categories, such that we all see our individual and varied collective investments in multiple histories of gender, sexuality, and difference. Such a post-identity politics positioning in relation to historical subjects and phenomena moves us well beyond the early queer historiographical preoccupation with prominent “lesbian” and “gay” predecessors—the often race- and class-biased paeans to this or that famous person, lunk or, uhm, queen, or figure from classical Greece. It further animates the very useful discourse theory critiques of normalcy; its ever-changing production, maintenance, and reproduction over time; and its perpetual, dialectical relationship

to deviancy. Melding social history with histories of consciousness, it illuminates and complicates the most fundamental practices of everyday life across time, with the potential to elicit diverse student bodies' differing and ever-shifting senses of connectedness to the past.

The revolutionary potential of queering instruction became apparent to me when I was asked for the first (and last) time to serve at Duke on a university-wide committee, in this case on diversity and the curriculum. When some members claimed that great diversity already existed in campus course offerings—that is, in the number of courses that, using today's identity categories, mentioned non-white races, non-elite classes, non-Anglo-Saxon ethnicities, non-male genders, non-hetero sexualities—when they suggested a pick-and-choose system that would still allow the average student to slip through four years without any explicit brush with difference, Paula Giddings boldly (in light of Stanford's well-publicized debacle) suggested a single course to be required of all undergraduates: "The Historical Production of Human Difference." I've rarely seen a group of academic administrators more troubled.

Barring for the foreseeable future such systemic change in the curriculum, how might historians best utilize what pedagogical freedom is afforded when we shut the classroom door? What teaching strategies belie or rightly betray the more public course title, course syllabus, and departmental and college political posturing? How might sexualities become a principal concern of myriad historical projects? How might the conceptual dominance of identity, community, and politics—the presumably safer topics—be eclipsed or opened up by focuses on desire, pleasure, and behavior across time? How might complex histories of desire subvert the primacy of sexual object choice or sexual orientation as a primary category of analysis?

Further, don't these questions themselves demonstrate that any historical project inevitably reflects the historical context of its creation? For example, identity politics of the 1970s through the 1990s stressed the import of gay identity and community. Unsurprisingly, histories generated during that time privileged and, in part, produced identity and community in prior eras. My call today for a *queer* history, to be focused upon the ever-changing relationship of normalcy to deviancy, happens alongside a contemporary focus on queer desire over gay identity. A deeply historicist project thus situates in time not only the object of study but also the conductor of the study. Both the history and the historian must be historicized. We should ask not only what do we study, but who are we who study? Who are we in relationship to what we study?

The ongoing study of things queer, variously defined, would be a part of—and might even become tantamount to—Giddings's provocative proposed course on the production of human difference. Queer studies is part of the ongoing human story of drawing distinctions between what is normal and what is not. What we study is inclusive of but not limited to the terms we now use to mark our perceived

cultural predecessors and their practices: “homosexual,” “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” “intersexual”—but also, “heterosexual,” “straight,” and so on. What we might best choose to study, perhaps, is the phenomenon of distinction-making itself, sexual and otherwise. Indeed, what becomes understood as sexual or not changes over time.

How, then, do we study? What constitutes evidence? As many essays in this volume show, queer history was not always documented. Letters were burned, lives went unremarked. Similarly, as I’ve suggested, queer teaching hasn’t always been recognized. Generations of teachers and professors have taught queer material without queer titles or syllabi. They taught normative texts and topics queerly. By privileging documents over other yet-to-be-imagined implements of history, traditional historical methodology ill-serves queer history. The method as well as the object of study should be queered. If, as these essays show, the nature of queerness changes over time, then queer studies—recently claimed as “pioneering”—itself has changed over time. It has changed and been reinvented, but it is not new. It has a long history of its own, a history distinct from, yet connected to, a broad range of intellectual endeavor. This collection suggests that histories of sexuality inevitably engage pedagogical concerns relevant to all historical practice.