

Teaching “Straight” Gay and Lesbian History

Nancy C. Unger

The importance of offering a lesbian and gay American history course was initially impressed upon me in 1986. A newly minted Ph.D., I was teaching my very first class: a U.S. history survey at San Francisco State University (SFSU). The course required each student to review a book of his or her choice on any topic in U.S. history. One student chose John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* from my list of suggested titles and wrote a thoughtful, enthusiastic review.¹ At the bottom of the review was a handwritten note: “Thanks for recommending this book. As a gay man, I didn’t know I had a history.” Didn’t know he *had* a history?! My fellow historians will share my sense of dismay and my determination to remedy this unthinkable state of affairs.

I have always included the history of gay men and lesbians in my various classes, not as a sop to “political correctness” and not because it is an amusing/interesting “add on” to “real” history, but because it is a vital component of a more complete understanding of American political, economic, social, legal, military, and religious history. For example, my courses that focus on the twentieth century include the significant role that the campaign against homosexuals played in McCarthy-era persecutions; in “U.S. Historical Geography” (which examines the role physical geography has played in the development of the United States), we study how and why the coastal cities of New York and San Francisco emerged as major centers of homophile populations; in women’s history courses we examine the controversy and contributions lesbians brought to various feminist movements.

Around 1989, a contingent of gay and lesbian SFSU students who appreciated the inclusion of their history in my classes came to my office to formally request that I offer a course on the history of American homosexuality. The curriculum committee approved my proposal, and the course was introduced. To my disappointment, because of a quirk in university policy, I, a lowly lecturer, was not allowed to teach “my” course. It was officially assigned to a tenure-track colleague but in fact taught by an exceptionally qualified graduate student.²

Nancy C. Unger is associate professor of history and of women’s and gender studies at Santa Clara University.

Mary Whisner made valuable contributions to this essay.

Readers may contact Unger at nunger@scu.edu.

¹ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago, 1983).

² The LGBTQ (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered/queer) scholar Linda Heidenreich, today associate professor of women’s studies at Washington State University, Pullman, was the graduate student who taught the course.

In 1994 I came to Santa Clara University (SCU), a Catholic, Jesuit institution in the heart of California's Silicon Valley. Based on my undergraduate education at the more conservative Gonzaga University (also a Jesuit school), I assumed that teaching my own lesbian and gay course was now a complete impossibility. I continued to incorporate gay and lesbian history into much of my research and my courses, however, and was pleasantly surprised to find that my desire to offer a dedicated course on that topic was supported by students, faculty, and administrators. That support included a \$4,000 Building Partnerships for Diversity grant in 2001 from the university's Center for Multicultural Learning to fund the development of the course. Ironically, the center did not recognize issues of sexuality in its definition of "multicultural"—the funding was granted to support the course's emphasis on the role of race within homosexual communities.

Despite the widespread support I was receiving, as I developed the course I continued to worry about the reaction of older alumni. Considering Santa Clara University's setting in the traditionally liberal San Francisco Bay area, I felt less trepidation than I would have if I were offering the course on a campus in a conservative stronghold. Nevertheless, based on letters to the editor of the alumni magazine, I knew that while most alumni are delighted about the university's serious commitment to social justice, especially its emphasis on the dignity of all persons, others are still fuming over the "radical" decision to admit women to the university in 1961.

Once the course was officially on the books, the university's Jesuit president sought from the chairs of the English and history departments a response to a letter he had received from a parent whose child was considering applying to SCU. This parent had been appalled to find gay and lesbian subject matter in the course catalog and clearly envisioned my course not as social history but as something along the lines of "Great Gays in American History," which would feature lots of lectures beginning with, "Did you know that [insert famous name here] was gay?" My response to the president spells out the course's actual themes and objectives:

The author [of the complaint letter] states the belief that "when individual authors or historical figures are identified by their orientation and their contributions 'celebrated,' there is the implication of support for their lifestyle." I would like to reassure this person that no history course at Santa Clara University seeks "celebration" as its goal. The discipline of history seeks to understand the past and, in so doing, develop the crucial skills of critical thinking, particularly the ability to prepare and communicate well supported arguments and interpretations. A course on the Holocaust, for example, would not be offered to celebrate genocide, but to understand why and how such unspeakable acts could be carried out against fellow human beings.

. . . for the past several decades, the history of a number of groups and movements previously overlooked has been a major emphasis. Courses on labor, racial minorities, women, and gender have proliferated across the nation. More recently environmental history and historical geography have been added to the mix. The combined result of all these new courses is not a series of isolated studies, but a much more complete picture of the many complex issues and interactions that make up American history. History is a tool of understanding rather than celebration. The gay and lesbian course does not seek to defend or denounce homosexuality any more than the women's courses defend or denounce women, or historical geography courses defend or denounce physical geography.



Cross-dressing occurred throughout American history. In this picture postcard (c. 1890–1930), unidentified women dress as men, possibly for a theatrical production. *Courtesy William Lipsky.*

The university's president thanked me for my "thoughtful, thorough" response, and that was the end of any opposition I have encountered at SCU as a result of offering the course.³ My only other negative encounter came at a local community college when I gave a guest lecture on lesbians in the nineteenth century. Because I was at a public rather than religious institution, I anticipated that I would encounter no resistance. What I had not counted on was the presence of a fundamentalist Christian who quoted Bible verses as I began my lecture. That experience made me appreciate anew my own religious institution's emphasis on social justice.

"Gays/Lesbians in U.S. History," an upper-division course (History 177), was first offered at Santa Clara University in the spring of 2002. I gave it that title for two reasons. First, I did not want there to be any confusion about the course's content. Even with a title such as "Diverse Sexualities in American History," students might still expect a class focused primarily on heterosexual themes. Secondly, although the course touches on queer, transgendered, and bisexual issues (to provide appropriate context, I begin with a brief section on queer theory), I wanted it to be clear that the course had a straight (that is, exclusive) gay and lesbian emphasis.

Having settled on the title, I fretted about it. Roughly half of SCU's students are Catholic, a few are Muslim. Would they sign up for this course? Even if they were interested, would they want the words "gay" and "lesbian" on their college transcripts? SCU is an expensive private school, and, although many students work part time, most are partially

³ Santa Clara University provost Denise Carmody pasted the complaint by the parent of the prospective student into an e-mail she sent to the chair of the history department, Thomas Turley. I sent a response to the president of the university, Paul Locatelli, S.J. Denise Carmody to Thomas Turley, e-mail, April 18, 2002 (in Nancy Unger's possession); Nancy Unger to Paul Locatelli, S.J., e-mail, April 23, 2002, *ibid.* Locatelli to Unger, e-mail, April 23, 2002, *ibid.*

or fully funded by their parents. Would parents pay to have “those words” on their children’s official record? The course satisfied the college’s U.S. core requirement as well as the women’s and gender/ethnic studies requirement (a double dipper!), but I was still nervous about attracting sufficient enrollments to justify not just this initial offering but subsequent sections. For the first time in my career, I advertised a class, posting flyers throughout the history and women’s and gender studies departments.

The course quickly reached its cap of twenty-five students. An equal number were on the waiting list, a pattern that has been repeated in subsequent offerings (the course is offered every year). In that first offering, as in subsequent years, the students were primarily juniors and seniors, with men and women represented in equal numbers. I do not inquire as to my students’ sexualities, but their personal histories are sometimes revealed during discussions. Of the students who make their sexual identification known, the majority identify as straight. Some of them are drawn to the class because of a gay or lesbian parent or sibling, but most enroll because they are interested in the subject matter (and in fulfilling two core requirements). The others who self-identify as gay or lesbian in roughly equal numbers. Only a few identify as bisexual, with only one (so far) identifying as “gender outlaw.”

As part of a phenomenon described by Stephanie Fairington in the *Gay and Lesbian Review* as “The New Post-Straight” (concerning straight academics who teach queer studies), I never explicitly discuss my own sexuality, but I wear makeup, dresses, and a wedding ring. Straight women hardly have a monopoly on those accoutrements, but I expect that most of my students assume, correctly, that I place on the heterosexual side of the Kinsey scale. As such, I am never bothered by issues of “authenticity” in teaching the course. After all, as a scholar trained in the study of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, I authored a biography of Robert M. La Follette and never once worried that my lack of authenticity (I am not a powerful politician nor am I male or dead) disqualified me from writing that book or from teaching about lots of other dead men once in political power. What is important to me and to my students in all the courses I teach is not whether I am like or unlike the people we study, but whether I have the scholarly expertise to teach the class to the highest standards. The fact that it was a contingent of gay and lesbian students who originally urged me to offer my lesbian and gay history course fostered my belief that my sexual identity does not hinder my credibility with my students. Gay and lesbian students have told me that my being straight adds to their sense of the course’s credibility. I urge them to consider, however, what it might mean to them to have someone such as our university’s only openly lesbian professor (the renowned LGBTQ [lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered/queer] scholar Linda Garber, associate professor of English and director of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program) teaching gay and lesbian history as a respected faculty member on our Jesuit campus. They agree that having openly homosexual professors provides important role models, but by no means do they think that professors must be what they teach.⁴

The dynamics for the class are established on the first day. I begin by explaining that the course will focus primarily on the history of American lesbians and gay men, and I suggest that we start by defining our terms. I ask the class what makes a woman a lesbian.

⁴ Stephanie Fairington, “The New Post-Straight,” *Gay and Lesbian Review* (Nov./Dec. 2004), 33–34. Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

A few tentative definitions are proposed, but other students find them too broad or too narrow. Debates quickly ensue, setting the tone for the thoughtful, wide-ranging discussions I strongly encourage. I throw out a few questions to stir the pot. Is it only desire that “counts,” or do actions matter as well? What if a woman’s heartfelt sexual attraction is to other women, but she never acts on it? If such a woman marries a man, bears children, and never has a sexual relationship with another woman, is she a lesbian? What about a “political lesbian,” a woman who desires men sexually, chooses to remain celibate, yet identifies as a lesbian because she believes it impossible for a woman to have a truly egalitarian relationship with a man? What if that same woman does have sexual relations exclusively with women? What about a woman who has satisfying sexual relationships exclusively with men, but who enjoys fantasies about other women?

This complicated and often volatile effort to answer the “simple” question of what makes a woman a lesbian sets the stage for the first reading, an excerpt from Annamarie Jagose’s *Queer Theory*. In their end-of-term evaluations, most students list this as the most difficult of all the readings. A few, however, love to grapple with issues of theory, appreciate the opportunity to contextualize the course, and throw themselves into the discussion with gusto. Others save their enthusiasm for discussions of the more fact-based readings on homosexuality in American history. I have continued to assign the books I chose for the course’s initial offering: Leila Rupp’s brief but delightful overview, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America*; Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*; and *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey*, the first volume of Martin Duberman’s memoirs. To augment those materials I used some of my grant monies to compile a reader consisting of fourteen essays selected as a sampling of some of the best writing and newest thinking in the field. They were also selected to cover the very wide range of subjects noted in the course description. Although modern notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality are relatively new, I want my students to appreciate that same-sex desire has always played an important role in American history. The course reader includes an article on pre-Columbian Native American sex/gender systems from *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, and “Hearing Voices,” an essay on same-sex sexual practices in Africa and their impact on relationships among the enslaved in colonial America. A particularly popular reading is Richard Godbeer’s “Sodomy in Colonial New England,” in which surprisingly tolerant attitudes about same-sex acts reveal much about seventeenth-century colonial law, religion, and community relationships. Because a significant portion of my students are Asian American, the readings from Russell Leong’s *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* also tend to generate a great deal of interest.⁵

What all my students have in common is enthusiasm for the subject matter. No one ever complains, “Gay and lesbian history *again?*” Although all of the signposts are familiar

⁵ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York, 1996), 1–21. Leila Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago, 2002); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1992); Martin Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey* (Boulder, 2002). Midnight Sun, “Sex/Gender Systems in Native North America,” in *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, ed. Will Roscoe (New York, 1988), 32–47; Cary Alan Johnson, “Hearing Voices: Unearthing Evidence of Homosexuality in Precolonial Africa,” in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles, 2001), 132–48. Richard Godbeer, “Sodomy in Colonial New England,” in *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality: Documents and Essays*, ed. Kathy Lee Peiss (Boston, 2001), 92–106. Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (New York, 1995).



Although modern notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality are relatively new, same-sex desire has always played an important role in American history. A suggestion of same-sex intimacy is depicted in this unidentified artist's rendering of men in the Old West. Faced with a shortage of women, they dance with each other. *Plate 150 in Owen C. Coy, Pictorial History of California (Berkeley, 1925). Reprinted in William Lipsky, Images of America: Gay and Lesbian San Francisco (Charleston, 2006).*

from countless American history classes from kindergarten on (the pre-Columbian period, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, and so on), the course material is new—a combination students seem to appreciate. The course not only fills in the blanks in the more conventional histories, but it also raises questions vital to the study of history and to critical thinking. We discuss, for example, Charles Clifton's "Rereading Voices from the Past," which suggests that many male slave narratives include coded language indicating that the authors were raped by their male owners.⁶ Clifton argues that such coded language deserves the same careful study as the language in female slave narratives, and he suggests that male/male rape is an aspect of the American slave experience that has been overlooked. His article generates much lively discussion about historical sources and the limits of interpretation.

My gay and lesbian history course is one of the most successful I have ever taught. In their anonymous evaluations at the end of the course, my students frequently refer to the class as "one of the best" and even "the best" of their university experience. For many students, it is like finding the missing piece to a puzzle—it rounds out their understanding of history acquired in previous classes even as it inspires them to learn more. Others are profoundly empowered by learning for the first time of a history of gay men and lesbians with whom they share some experience or identity. Although I would like to report that it is my lectures that consistently receive top marks, in truth, what many students cite

⁶ Charles Clifton, "Rereading Voices from the Past: Images of Homo-Eroticism in the Slave Narrative," in *Greatest Taboo*, ed. Constantine-Simms, 342–61.



As a study of an oppressed people's struggle for civil rights, gay and lesbian political actions offer valuable insight into American history. Here, on Armed Forces Day, May 21, 1966, gay men hold a rally on the steps of the federal building in San Francisco's Civic Center to protest their exclusion from the military. *Courtesy GLBT Historical Society of California, San Francisco, California.*

as particularly valuable are the three documentaries shown in class: *Before Stonewall*, *After Stonewall*, and *The Celluloid Closet*. The first two always evoke a sense of wonder and amazement: Old people! Talking about *sex*! The history they have been reading, pondering, and discussing in a fairly intellectual way suddenly comes alive. They feel the despair and pain caused by institutionalized homophobia and are shocked by the depth and breadth of legal discrimination. They see how a marginalized group strategized to acquire civil rights, then responded to a deadly epidemic. In *After Stonewall*, when they witness members of ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) disrupting a Mass in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral, many of my students (and not just the Catholics) literally gasp, they are so struck by the power of that painful, highly controversial confrontation. *The Celluloid Closet* (a documentary on the depictions of homosexuals in popular film) elicits discussion on the power of popular culture in inculcating, challenging, and changing attitudes and perceptions.⁷

The combination of readings, films, and discussions gives my students important historical perspective on current issues, ranging from the controversies over gay marriage and adoption to the military's policy of "don't ask, don't tell." They appreciate the value of history, not just as a collection of stories about the past, but as a vital tool in the efforts to resolve present-day questions and problems.

While I consider the course to be highly successful, I have been less successful in bringing gay and lesbian history into high school classrooms. I have given a series of talks to groups of high school teachers on how to incorporate gender history into their course curricula (emphasizing that it is not an "add on") as a new and exciting way to meet some of the existing state requirements. They are openly leery of discussion in their classrooms of

⁷ *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*, dir. John Scagliotti, Greta Schiller, and Robert Rosenberg (Before Stonewall, Inc., 1985); *After Stonewall*, dir. John Scagliotti (First Run Features, 1999); *The Celluloid Closet*, dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (Sony Pictures, 1995).

anything to do with homosexuality for fear of generating controversy that will get them into trouble. I suggest that they tackle the issue head on: Before launching into a lesson plan, explain that they are not seeking a discussion of personal views on homosexuality, but rather offering an instructive new way of examining the American past by exploring the history of an overlooked minority. One approach might be to look at how some gay and lesbian individuals and organizations consciously borrowed from the African American civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s and the women's rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Such a comparative approach invites study of the larger issues and strategies involved in all civil rights struggles, while it also points out the differences in the various groups' challenges and solutions. It can also elicit useful questions about identity, as many Americans were (and are) members of more than one oppressed group. Members of my audiences of teachers nod and take notes, but in their e-mails to me, in which they excitedly report back on their success in working some of my suggestions into their lesson plans, their selections are always from my material on women's, rather than gay and lesbian, history.

I am excited that History 177 is now routinely included in my annual course offerings, but I am also rather daunted by the task of continually updating my course readings. There has been such an explosion of superb research in recent years that I have found it impossible to keep up even with LGBTQ book *reviews*, let alone the actual books, articles, and scholarly papers. One of the great benefits of allowing students to pick their own research paper topics is that they are doing much of my work for me, investigating the most recent and exciting scholarship on a vast array of topics. I look forward to many more years of learning and writing about gay and lesbian people and movements, and to teaching this lively course so integral to the study of history.