

# 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. Suetonius 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.

# One. The Persecuting Society

If you were to ask average Americans when lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender history started in this nation, some would cite the Stonewall “riots” that took place in New York’s Greenwich Village in 1969. Others might go back to 1950, when Harry Hay founded the Mattachine Society, the first public gay group in the United States. Some may reach back even further in the previous century to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, his homoerotic poetry of male love—what he called “male adhesiveness”—or Emily Dickinson’s love poems to her sister-in-law, Sue Gilbert. The well-informed might mention Deborah Sampson, an impoverished indentured servant who, as Robert Shurtliff, fought for the colonists during the Revolutionary War.

These examples highlight some of the problems that arise in writing a queer history of the United States. What do we consider to be gay history? How is it defined? In order to grapple with these issues in all their complexity, I begin this history in the late fifteenth century. The United States as a political entity will not exist for another 270 years. The word, and social identity, “homosexual” will not come into being for 350 years. Yet we know there were women and men who engaged in sexual activity with their own sex, as well those who resisted following the accepted, enforced gender roles of their time.

Understanding these people’s lives requires understanding basic social, political, intellectual, and psychological frameworks. To understand North America in the sixteenth century, we need to look at the lives and cultures of the people who were here before the European colonists arrived and how the clash between indigenous cultures and

European cultures set the stage for the next five hundred years of United States history.

Europeans came to the Americas with an extraordinarily rigorous sense of how gender and sexuality should be organized. These strict ideas were bulwarked by rigid civil and religious statutes. The Europeans attempted to eradicate many non-European gender-normative customs, traditions, and behaviors. They often did this through accepted practices of violence, such as capturing and enslaving non-Christians and forced conversion. This legal and religious repression and violence provided a template for how mainstream European culture would treat LGBT people throughout much of U.S. history.

### Strangers in a Strange Land

Numerous Europeans who journeyed to the “new” continent of America did so for the political and economic advantage of newly emerging and quickly growing European nation-states . Beginning with Columbus in 1492 and continuing for over a century, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and British soldiers, sailors, merchants, and adventurers sailed to the New World on business ventures. While this century-long project was entrepreneurial, what continues to influence our culture today is the religious and sexual attitudes of the Europeans. They saw the gender norms and behaviors of indigenous peoples as markedly different from their own, even as the cultures of individual tribes were completely different from one another. These startling gender differences took many forms. The presence of female divinities who were responsible for creation, or the fact that in many nations, women were the house builders, was antithetical to European theology and practice. Europeans found the native peoples alarmingly innocent and dangerously sexual. They were shocked that some tribes lived naked or wore few clothes, that they engaged in a wide variety of “immoral” sexual practices—not predicated on reproduction—and that marriage laws and traditional European mating conventions were unknown. Particularly disturbing was that some cultures allowed women various degrees of sexual

equality. For the Europeans, the most extreme examples were the women and men who dressed and behaved as, in their eyes, the other sex.<sup>1</sup>

Often referred to by French explorers as *berdache*—an incorrect name, implying a catamite or young male sodomite—these women and men took on the dress and the tribal duties of the other sex. Their roles in each culture differed. Sometimes they were placed in socially elevated positions as religious figures, shamans, or artisans. Among the Crows, “men who dressed as women and specialized in women’s work were accepted and sometimes honored; a woman who led men into battle and had four wives was a respected chief.”<sup>2</sup> In some cases, these “third sex” figures were integral to traditions of tribal violence and warfare. In some cultures young boys became berdache through enforced, institutionalized concubinage. For example, the Yuma, who resided in what is now Colorado, “appointed an infant to fill the post of fourth tribal berdache. Presumably upon growing up, this boy became a sexual resource or passive . . . for the nubile boys in the tribe.”<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary LGBT writing on gender roles in indigenous cultures has often oversimplified, even sentimentalized, this history. The systems of berdache that existed before and after the European invasions were complicated and served different purposes for each tribe. More fluid than European gender arrangements, the creation of nonbinary genders was a different model and not necessarily more liberatory. Some contemporary writers, including LGBT Native Americans, interpret the berdache as equivalent to our contemporary understanding of “gay.” While superficial similarities exist between behaviors in some berdache cultures and present-day gay male, lesbian, or transgender cultures, the circumstances separating the two are radically dissimilar.

Military men, clergy, and explorers repeatedly made connections between indigenous people’s (real and imagined) sexual practices and their lower place in a European moral and economic hierarchy. In his journals of 1673–77, Jacques Marquette, the French Jesuit missionary, describes berdache practices among the native peoples he met on his first voyage down the Mississippi:

I know not through what superstition some Illinois [*sic*], as well as some Nadouessi, while still young, assume the garb of women, and retain it throughout their lives. There is some mystery in this, for they never marry and glory in demeaning themselves to do everything that the women do. They go to war, however, but can use only clubs, and not bows and arrows, which are the weapons proper to men. They are present at all the juggleries, and at the solemn dances in honor of the Calumet; at these they sing, but must not dance. They are summoned to the Councils, and nothing can be decided without their advice. Finally, through their profession of leading an Extraordinary life, they pass for Manitous,—That is to say, for Spirits,—or persons of Consequence.<sup>4</sup>

The 1702 “Memoir of Pierre Liette on the Illinois Country” notes that “the sin of sodomy prevails more among [the Miami] than in any other nation, although there are four women to one man. It is true that the women, although debauched, retain some moderation, which prevents the young men from satisfying their passions as much as they would like.”<sup>5</sup> In a diary from his 1775 trip to what is now California, Franciscan Pedro Font provides a lens to the way in which many Christian Europeans viewed indigenous cross-dressing figures, as well as his religious duty to them:

Among the women I saw some men dressed like women, with whom they go about regularly, never joining the men. . . . From this I inferred they must be hermaphrodites, but from what I learned later I understood that they were sodomites, dedicated to nefarious practices. From all the foregoing I conclude that in this matter of incontinence there will be much to do when the Holy Faith and the Christian religion are established among them.<sup>6</sup>

In *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expeditions* (written between 1804 and 1810), Nicholas Biddle notes that “Among Mamitarees if a boy shows any symptoms of effeminacy or girlish inclinations he is put among the girls, dressed in their way, brought up

with them, & sometimes married to men.”<sup>7</sup> Such reports, which continued to be written into the early years of the twentieth century, were mixtures of journalism and crude anthropology that emphasized the sexual and gender “foreignness” of native people.

Violence against all native peoples, not just those that violated European gender norms, was widespread. Columbus, in his second expedition in 1495 after his search for gold faltered, invaded the interior of Haiti and abducted fifteen hundred Arawak children, women, and men to be shipped to Europe as slaves. Of the five hundred slaves shipped to Spain, only three hundred arrived alive and were put up for sale by an archbishop “who reported that, although the slaves were ‘naked as the day they were born,’ they showed ‘no more embarrassment than animals.’”<sup>8</sup>

European religious and social thought held that people who did not adhere to Christian concepts of sexual behavior, gender affect, or modesty were less than human; they were like animals. This qualified them to be deprived of individuality, liberty, and life itself. Pietro Martire d’Anghiera, an Italian historian who documented the military campaigns of Spanish explorers, notes in his 1516 *De Orbe Novo* that Vasco Núñez de Balboa had vicious mastiffs rip apart forty Panamanian men dressed as women who were engaging in sodomy with other men. This account was the first mention of berdache in European literature.

## Puritanism: The Individual and the Community

France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Great Britain viewed the Americas as potential financial and political windfalls, and they embarked on myriad destructive colonization projects. The British, however, had the most influence on what was to become the United States. French and Spanish cultural legacies—especially a tradition of Roman Catholicism—are integral to American identity, but English common law and British Protestantism overwhelmingly shaped American thinking and culture, particularly in relationship to sexual behavior and gender.

British colonies grew rapidly: Jamestown, founded in 1607, quickly began to ship raw materials back to England. In 1620 just over one hundred British “Pilgrims,” members of a radical religious separatist group, landed in what is now Massachusetts and signed the Mayflower Compact, the template for self-governance in the newly forming colonies. Ten years later, nearly a thousand Puritans fled religious persecution in England and, under the leadership of John Winthrop, formed a self-ruling community and established the city of Boston. The growth of the colonies was the beginning of a distinctly new colonist culture that was intent on defining itself.

The Puritans’ view of the world and sexuality—which would have a tremendous effect on America—was shaped by their experiences in Great Britain before arriving in the New World. The Reformation and the founding of the Anglican church by Henry VIII in 1534 brought about the collapse of a cohesive Roman Catholic polity in Europe. From 1558 to 1649 Elizabeth I, James I, and Charles I ruled England and the colonies. During that time English culture accepted and promoted a wide range of diverse, sometimes conflicting, views about sexuality and gender. These ideas were intimately connected with how Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan culture thought about religion and religious practice. Cross-dressing—which had been condemned by Catholic theologians such as Augustine and Tertullian since the second century—was a mandated theatrical convention, since women were not allowed to perform on the stage. There was an enormous public fascination with female cross-dressing, as witnessed by several plays. For instance, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s popular 1607 play *The Roaring Girl* dramatized the life and celebrated cross-dressing criminal career of Mary Frith, who was also known as Moll Cutpurse. Ben Johnson’s 1609 play *Epicoene* revolved around cross-dressing and included numerous allusions to same-sex sexual behavior.

Social and legal prohibitions against same-sex activity in Elizabethan England were applied haphazardly. Same-sex relationships were illegal, but the culture was accepting enough to allow for public representation and discussion of same-sex attraction and sexual behavior. Christopher Marlow was widely rumored to have sex with men and was accused, during a trial for heresy, of stating that “all they



that love not tobacco and boys are fools.” More shocking, he is alleged to have proclaimed that “St. John the Evangelist was bedfellow to Christ and leaned always in his bosom, that he used him as the sinners of Sodom.” Marlow’s 1592 play *Edward II* detailed the death of an English monarch murdered, in part, because of his relationship with Piers Gaveston. Shakespeare’s sonnets are filled with gender and sexuality ambiguity that give us a sense of the wide range of what was culturally permissible during the Elizabethan era. Furthermore, James I, who reigned from 1603 to 1625, was widely understood to have had erotic relationships with court “favorites” such as George Villiers, First Duke of Buckingham—even as his treatise *Basilikon Doron* lists sodomy among crimes “ye are bound in conscience never to forgive.”

In response to this sexually permissive behavior—as well as the economic and class dissatisfaction that eventually led to the English Civil War and the beheading of Charles I in 1649—highly politicized, radical religious groups dissented from the Church of England. The theological and political range of these groups, which included the Levelers, Ranters, Muggletonians, Quakers, and Puritans, was broad, but they all sought radical reorganization of British society. Ranters and Levelers were utopian and anarchistic, seeking to eliminate class and economic privilege and rejecting norms around sexual behavior. They rejected so much traditional Christian doctrine that mainstream social and religious leaders accused them of licentiousness and were suspicious of their views about gender behavior. Quakers were considered particularly dangerous, since they rejected established government, forbade men to carry arms or fight, and encouraged women to speak at religious meetings.

The Puritans not only rejected the Church of England, but also rejected what they saw as the political and social excesses of the other dissenting groups. They critiqued the Church of England for veering toward Rome and wanted to return it to a “pure” state. All of the Protestant sects in England and throughout Europe viewed the Roman Catholic Church as emblematic of the decadent sensibility, including sexual profligacy, that they witnessed in England. They commonly referred to the Papacy as “the painted whore of Babylon” and viewed Italian culture itself as promoting sexually deviant, same-sex acts.

Daniel Defoe, in his 1703 poem “A True Born Englishman,” opined “Lust chose the Torrid Zone of Italy / Where Blood ferments Rapes and Sodomy.”

Not accepted by others, and not accepting of them back, the Puritans fled England. They explicitly understood their emigration as an exodus, a direct analogy to the Jews leaving Egypt for Israel, seeking a promised land and freedom. John Winthrop, in his famous 1630 sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” likened the new colony to old Jerusalem: a “city upon a hill.”

When the Puritans established a religious society in the colonies, they were determined to ensure that its members did not fall prey to the temptations and errors they had left behind in England. Therefore they enacted strict legal sanctions against deviance from sexual and gender norms. Many of these norms directly impacted people who sexually desired members of their own sex or who challenged traditional gender roles. Sodomy laws in Europe and America were not specifically aimed at same-sex activity; they were intended to punish all nonreproductive sexual activity. Laws passed in the colonies to instill personal and social sexual morality were most often an amalgam of preexisting British law, such as Henry VIII’s Buggery Act of 1533, and biblical injunctions, in particular Leviticus 20:13. Dozens of these laws existed in the new colonies. They varied widely in specifics—some laws targeted public masturbation rather than anal sex—but they all had two commonalities: they used phrases such as “abomination” and “the unspeakable crime against nature,” and they considered such crimes capital offenses.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the law, Puritans were having sex. Historian Richard Godbeer notes that more than one hundred women were convicted of having children out of wedlock in Essex County (in the Bay Colony) between 1640 and 1685, and that the Suffolk County Court adjudicated over two hundred of cases of illicit sex during the 1670s.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, as indicated by the ever-increasing birthrate in the second half of the seventeenth century, husbands and wives were actively procreating.<sup>11</sup> And other forms of sexual activity were not unknown. *The Problems of Aristotle*, a late seventeenth-century sex manual read in the colonies, discussed oral sex in the question of whether “carnal copulation [can] be done by the mouth.” Although such nonreproductive sexual information

may have met with some disapproval, it was nevertheless available and part of public discourse.<sup>12</sup>

There were, without a doubt, women and men who desired and interacted sexually with members of their own sex. Over time, sodomy laws were used more often against same-sex coupling than opposite-sex coupling, and some men, and occasionally women, were punished for their sexual actions. Because most sexual behavior is private, much of the information we have about same-sex activity is from court cases or other public records, which provide a vivid but incomplete sense of the time.

Historian Jonathan Ned Katz charts numerous incidents of men being punished, sometimes by death, for sodomy. In 1624 the Virginia colony hanged Richard Cornish, a ship's master, for sexually assaulting a younger shipmate.<sup>13</sup> In 1629 Rev. Francis Higginson noted in his diary that during his trip to the Massachusetts colony, five "beastly Sodomitically boyes" were caught engaging in sexual activity and sent to be punished, potentially by death, in England.<sup>14</sup> In his midcentury journals, John Winthrop wrote of Plaine of Guilford "being discovered to have used some unclean practices. . . . He had committed sodomy with two persons in England. And had corrupted a great part of the youth of Guilford by masturbations, which he had committed, and provoked others to the like above a hundred times."<sup>15</sup> We can assume that there was public concern about sex between women, or that it was occurring, since Rhode Island's 1647 law and New Haven's 1655 law both explicitly prohibit sexual activity between women.

It is misleading, however, to think that Puritan legal culture vigilantly sought out and punished all sexual transgressions immediately and with the same ferocity. The case of Nicholas Sension of Windsor, Connecticut, is a good example. Sension was married and childless. From the 1640s to 1677, when Sension was brought before the colony's General Court for sodomy charges, he had a long and fairly well-known history of propositioning men for sex, offering to pay for sex, and sexually assaulting male servants. Although town elders had admonished Sension in the late 1640s and again in the late 1660s, he was not formally charged for another decade. While some of his neighbors disapproved of his behavior, there was a general consensus

not to bring formal legal charges. Historians speculate that some of Sension's activity was with willing partners and was viewed, by enough people, as moderately acceptable. Perhaps Sension's status in the community protected him, or the fact that many of his partners were men of lesser social rank may have lent his crimes a lower profile. Sension's trial in 1677 resulted in his being convicted of attempted sodomy. He was whipped, publicly shamed on a gallows with a rope around his neck, and "his entire estate was placed in bond for his good behavior."<sup>16</sup>

Windsor's laxness in prosecuting Sension may have been because his sexual activity took place in private. While his actions were certainly considered grievously illegal and immoral, as private acts they had less impact on the community than, say, an act of adultery, which might result in pregnancy or the dissolution of a marriage. Puritans in the colonies viewed marriage as a civil contract, not a sacrament, and were concerned about the impact of divorce on the community, generally permitting it only for abandonment. Nonmarital sexuality was immoral because it did not contribute to the family on which society organized.

The Puritans had fled Great Britain to secure religious freedom for themselves, not others; they never intended to found a democracy. John Winthrop was clear: "If we should change from a mixed aristocracy to mere democracy, first we should have no warrant in scripture for it: for there was no such government in Israel. . . . A democracy is, amongst civil nations, accounted the meanest and worst of all forms of government. [To allow it would be] a manifest breach of the 5th Commandment" (honor your father and mother).<sup>17</sup> For the Puritans, the family was central to religious and civil society; immoral and illegal acts that, by taking place in private, did not directly threaten it may have been viewed with some leniency.

We have a few clues about how men like Sension related (likely in private) to others who engaged in similar behavior, or what kind of nonfamilial community they formed. The Boston Gay History Project examined court records between 1636 and 1641 of men accused of sodomy, "lude behaviour and unclean carriage" and charted what appears to be a series of relationships among a number of men,

including Thomas Roberts, John Alexander, Abraham Pottle, and George Morrey. In 1640, when the court ordered Thomas Roberts to no longer live with George Morrey, it is possible to infer that what was worrisome to the judiciary was not a personal and possibly sexual relationship, but the publicness of men with such reputations living together.<sup>18</sup> Did these men, who may all have been involved in sexual relationships with one another, see themselves as part of a minority community? Did their sexual activity give them a specific personal or social identity, or sense of a sexual self, even if the concept of “gay” did not exist?

Personal diaries and letters must be interpreted in historical context. When a letter writer uses elaborately passionate language, as Susanna Anthony did when writing to Sarah Osborn in the early eighteenth century—“my bosom friend, I feel my love to you to be without dissimulation, therefore wish you the same strength and consolation, with my own soul”—can we presume an erotic intent?<sup>19</sup> Conversely, there is a long history of interpreters of historical material who refuse to see *any* same-sex desire in letters and diaries. If we acknowledge that some personal writings attest to the presence of same-sex desire, we then must discern what these erotic feelings meant to the writer.

The diaries of Michael Wigglesworth exemplify this point. As a tutor at Harvard College in 1653, the distraught, twenty-three-year-old Wigglesworth wrote in his diary, “Such filthy lust flowing from my fond affection to my pupils whiles in their presence on the third day after noon that I confess myself an object of God’s loathing as my sin is my own; and pray God make it no more to me.” Is this passage proof that Wigglesworth experienced same-sex desires, and given Puritan culture, he felt guilt? Historian Alan Bray notes that a close reading of the diary also indicates that while Wigglesworth may have understood his sexual thoughts as incongruent with his morality, they were, because they were involuntary, less of a problem than the intense emotion that accompanied them. These intense feelings were a sin, because they were dangerously discordant with the Puritan concept of individualism that demanded, especially for men, emotional control. According to Bray, Wigglesworth’s “sin” was feeling emotions too strongly, not necessarily the content of the feelings.<sup>20</sup>

After considering the place of privacy, family, and community in understanding same-sex activity in early colonial culture, it is also important to examine this culture's relationship to the body. The Puritans in the colonies were on a distinct social and religious mission. While they were reacting against what they perceived as the sexual excesses of Elizabethan culture—they would have disapproved of Shakespeare's overt sexual puns as being immodest—this was not because they thought pleasure inherently bad. Rather, Puritan theology promoted the intrinsic worth and holiness of the body. This is one of the central reasons the Puritans called for the individual to have a personal, direct relationship with God. As authority in England was being deeply questioned, Puritans were attempting to “find a new master in themselves, a rigid self-control shaping a new personality. Conversion, sainthood, repression, collective discipline, were the answer to the unsettled conditions of society, the way to creating a new order through creating new men.”<sup>21</sup> The Puritans readily acknowledged sexual desire and pleasure but insisted that it needed to be expressed within the sanctity of marriage, for the sake of the family, community, and individual.

“Society,” claims Alan Bray, “is a process,” and nowhere is this more evident than in Puritan life in the American colonies.<sup>22</sup> The “process” of Puritan society was found in the need to constantly refocus on theological “purity”—the essence of holiness and social order. However, the exigencies of surviving in this new land presented situations that led even the strictest Puritans to compromise some principles. Also, as exemplified by Wigglesworth, strictly articulated sexual mores were often not followed in the letter or even the spirit of the law.

Puritanism was an experiment of a particular form of social and religious organization, not an arbitrarily repressive system. Puritanism was not, as twentieth-century social critic and wit H. L. Mencken famously defined it, “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.” Puritan children were permitted simple toys and games when they were not doing chores or studying the Bible. Puritans allowed moderate drinking. While not sartorially extravagant, they did not adopt the plain dress of Quakers, but allowed color and some ornamentation.



(All the colonies had laws regulating dress, usually with the intent of maintaining class distinctions, but in 1696 Massachusetts passed a law that explicitly forbade cross-dressing. Some historians argue that this law was intended to curb the possibility of same-sex sexual encounters.)<sup>23</sup> While procreative sex between a husband and wife was the only officially acceptable mode of sexual activity, some statistics show that at least 10 percent of Puritan marriage occurred after a pregnancy, and premarital sex generally went unpunished if it resulted in a stable marriage.

The individual soul was the life of the Puritan community and, conversely, the community was an embodiment of the soul. The concept of the individual was inseparable from the concept of community. It was vital, then, that the structures of this community be stable.

As a theologically based society, Puritans acted harshly toward religious diversity. In 1634, when Salem, Massachusetts, pastor Roger Williams was accused of spreading “diverse, new, and dangerous opinions”—advocating more religious freedom and toleration of native peoples—he was exiled. (The commonwealth law under which Williams was exiled was not repealed until 1936.) Upon leaving the Bay Colony, he founded Providence Plantations, now Rhode Island. Three years later Anne Hutchinson was imprisoned, then exiled from Massachusetts Bay Colony, for dissenting from Puritan doctrine, freely interpreting the Bible, preaching as a woman, and running Bible study groups for women. She and her followers settled in Providence Plantations. Massachusetts Bay Colony ministers labeled Hutchinson a “Jezebel”—the implication being that she, like the figure from the Book of Judges, was a sexually dangerous woman. Hutchinson’s theological boldness caused others to view her behavior as gender deviance. “You have stepped out of your place,” noted one minister. “You have rather been a husband than a wife, a preacher than a hearer, and a magistrate than a subject.” Over the decades, Providence Plantations became, for its time, a progressive colony. Capital punishment was rare, and debtors’ prisons and trials for witchcraft were abolished. In 1652 it was the first colony to ban all slavery, regardless of color.

In 1624 Thomas Morton and others, including thirty male indentured servants, founded a decidedly non-Puritan colony in Wollaston, now the

township of Quincy outside of Boston. They named the colony Merrymount, punning on Mare-Mount and Mary-Mount, direct references to bestial sodomy and Roman Catholicism. Morton befriended the local Algonquian tribe, whose culture he admired, and urged intermarriage between native women and male colonists. He also released the indentured servants and made them equal “consociates.” In 1627 he erected an eighty-foot-tall maypole with buck’s horns attached to the top (indicative of the sexualized god Pan or, from a Puritan view, Satan) and held, as was customary in medieval England, revels. Morton declared himself a Lord of Misrule.

Morton understood the sexual implications of his permissive agenda. In one of his writings about Merrymount, he noted that “there was likewise a merry song made, which [to make their revels more fashionable] was sung with a corus, every man bearing his part; which they performed in a dance, hand in hand about the May-pole, whilst one of the company sung, and filled out the good liquor like Gammedes and Jupiter.”<sup>24</sup> His invoking Gammedes (Ganymede) and Jupiter (the Roman name for Zeus) in Elizabethan culture was a clear reference to the archetypical male lovers in Greek mythology.

The reaction of the Puritans was immediate. William Bradford wrote in *Of Plimoth Plantation*, “They . . . set up a May-pole, drinking and dancing about it many days together, inviting the Indian women, for their consorts, dancing and frisking together, (like so many fairies, or furies rather,) and worse practices. As if they had anew revived & celebrated the feasts of ye Roman Goddess Flora, or ye beastly practices of ye mad Bacchanalians.” While Morton and his rapidly growing small colony posed no direct threat to Plymouth Colony, Bradford felt challenged enough to attack Merrymount and arrest its leader. In 1629 Morton was sent back to England. Merrymount was dismantled and its community dispersed. In London, Morton wrote political tracts that accused the Puritans of many crimes, including a fear of the native peoples that manifested itself in near-genocidal behaviors.

Expulsion from the Bay Colony was a mild punishment compared to death. The Puritans did execute women and men who they believed posed a danger to the community’s spiritual and political life. In 1658 the Massachusetts legislature passed a bill banning all Quakers from the



colony under pain of death. Under this law, Mary Dyer and four other Quakers, known as the Boston Martyrs, were hanged on the Boston Common.

Unrepentant Quakers were jailed, as were others who contested Puritan doctrine. Ann Glover, for example, was an elderly Irish woman sold into slavery by Oliver Cromwell in 1650. She was a practicing Catholic who also spoke Gaelic. She was accused of being a witch—historically, in Europe, an accusation primarily aimed at women—and hanged on the Boston Common in 1688. Cotton Mather noted that she was “a scandalous old Irishwoman, very poor, a Roman Catholic and obstinate in idolatry.” Within the gendered, parental hierarchy of the family in Puritan society, husbands and fathers were heads of households, and wives and children were beholden to them. This is why Puritans disapproved of Anne Hutchinson’s preaching and were quick to accuse nontraditional women of witchcraft.

The strict laws of the Puritans regarding sexual and gender behavior described a “gold standard” of human behavior, the goal to which all women and men should aspire. Puritan theology understood that since humans were imperfect, no one could live up to this ideal. It was also unrealistic to punish everyone for every infraction. Common sense dictated that laws were enforced for the good of the community as it was understood at the moment. But the importance of striving for an ideal way of life applied equally to the communities formed by Puritan dissenters, such as Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, and Thomas Morton. Although Morton returned to the colonies and died there in 1647, he could never realize his vision of a more open, even utopian, society, because the constant tension between control and liberation, the state and personal liberty, could not fully accommodate “extremes.”

In understanding the historical ramifications of laws that control sexual behavior, it is useful to remember that no universal baseline of appropriate sexual or gender behavior exists. “Sexual deviance” is often the cultural and political wild card used to demonize people who do not conform to certain sexual norms. Its accusation can be used by mainstream culture against marginalized groups or between marginalized groups themselves. We see throughout American history that restrictions against LGBT people are enforced “as needed” to

maintain the contemporary status quo—a clear example of Alan Bray’s concept of society as a process. Regardless of the status quo, process denotes adjustment, change, experiment, all in the name of an ideal way of life that is different for everyone. The Puritans, like most English dissenter groups, had been accused of envisioning “the world upside down.” Puritanism was, in this sense, a revolutionary movement.

## Purity and Danger

Bradford’s intense antagonism to Merrymount cannot be explained simply by his disapproval of the maypole and Morton’s sexual behaviors. It was Morton’s social egalitarianism, his openness to treating the Algonquians as relative equals, and his theological liberality that set him decisively apart from the Puritans. Bradford’s actions are understandable placed in a broader, historically complex tapestry of European and British history and the emergence of what British historian R. I. Moore calls the “persecuting society.” Moore argues that during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, European society underwent a profound and powerful transformation in which certain minorities, such as lepers, Jews, heretics, witches, “sodomites,” and prostitutes, were stigmatized and persecuted *as groups* and often physically separated from society. This physical isolation, which took the form of ghettos for Jews and social banishment of lepers, was often the precondition for a wide range of harsh punishments, including death.<sup>25</sup>

Moore argues that a series of fundamental social changes—including the rapid growth of towns and cities, broad changes in agricultural distribution networks, and a radical shift in how hierarchical power was distributed—created this new set of social classifications. Its purpose was to create clear social and cultural boundaries that would stabilize society by safely containing groups designated as dangerous pollutants. This fear of pollution was less about sex or death than about power and social standing. As Moore notes, “Pollution fear . . . is the fear that the privileged feel of those at whose expense their privilege is enjoyed.”<sup>26</sup> The colonists’ seizing of native peoples’ lands was not in self-defense,

but for economic gain, resulting in the fairly rapid development of colonial capitalism.

In the European mind, the non-gender-normative and non-sexually-normative body—however defined in each period and circumstance—was the dangerous body, the less-than-human body, even the disposable body. This wedding of draconian moral judgment to the need to separate and punish led to violence, particularly sexual violence, that was to shape attitudes in future centuries. Throughout history, sexual and gender deviance have always been used as reasons for almost all cultures, no matter how progressive, to deny certain people full rights as citizens.

In this view, the founding of modern society was predicated on the creation of minority groups whose only purpose was to be vilified as unclean and persecuted for the illusion of a comprehensive sense of societal safety. This idea, based on anthropologist Mary Douglas's widely accepted theory of purity and danger, is helpful in explaining broad trends in European and American culture.<sup>27</sup> The idea of purifying religious and secular thought and society was at the heart of Puritan identity. These ideas were continuous with the long European tradition of a persecuting society and emerged at a time of grave political and religious disruption that neatly dovetailed with the impulse to stabilize society through persecution. Throughout American history there is a pattern of persecuted groups, like the Puritans, treating other outsider groups in a similar manner.

Sodomy laws play a key element in structuring ideas about acceptable and unacceptable behavior in U.S. culture, and in structuring society itself, because gender and sexuality are often the prime axis by which society distinguishes between “purity” and “danger.” These statutes are a legal device regulating all sexuality, not just same-sex activity. Their norms include not just sexual behavior but gender expectations as well. It is not acceptable, therefore, for a biological male to be penetrated by another male, nor is it acceptable for women to engage in anything other than reproductive sexual activity. This is why the legal act of “sodomy” has no articulated, stable meaning—why in some laws it is labeled “unmentionable.”

Early colonial life in the northern continent was a mass of contradictions. It was extraordinarily intolerant, yet often surprisingly lax. The European settlers' relations to the native peoples ranged from murderous genocide to a complex series of eroticized relationships. While Europeans brought with them a persecuting society, the manifestations of that society took many forms. One of the lasting legacies of colonial social and legal culture was the application of laws prohibiting and punishing sexual activity between people of the same sex. Treating some sexual behaviors differently because potentially they had less impact on the community had a twin effect on future American culture. It gave rise to the social (and eventual legal) concept of "consenting adults" and to a domestic-based idea of privacy that offered protections to some people at certain points in history.

This concept of privacy, however, had another, damaging, impact on future social convention and law. By assigning sexuality to a private sphere, it prevented any public acknowledgment or discussion of almost all sexual activity. Thus it laid the groundwork for same-sex sexual behaviors and identities to be hidden and even considered shameful. While the Puritans rejected what they saw as sexual license or overt licentiousness in British culture, they fully accepted the role of sexuality and sexual desire in everyday life. This sharp divide—not exactly a contradiction, although it may have appeared so later, as sexual mores in American culture became more lenient—has remained a basic tenet of America's cultural life. The tension between the needs and demands of society and the decisions of an individual to live her or his life as part of, yet separate from, the community informed the four centuries that followed Europeans arriving in this foreign land.