

# **Stonewall, S.T.A.R. and Roosevelt: Why Teaching Intersectional LGBTQ History is Important**

*Julianna Boyson*

The history of queer people in the United States is a long and comprehensive one that is not known by many, as history textbooks seldom mention it. When LGBT+ history is mentioned in textbooks, it is usually a small portion on the start of the movement in the 1970s and then a section on the AIDS crisis. The 2017 Openstax textbook *U.S. History* contains sections like these ones, as well as a brief mention of Don't Ask Don't Tell and LGBTQ rights under the Obama administration. With New Jersey, Colorado and Illinois passing laws in the past year requiring LGBTQ history to be taught in schools, joining California which passed a similar law in 2011, it is more vital than ever that LGBTQ history is taught in a comprehensive, intersectional and above all, accurate way (Leins). While *U.S History* does include a section on LGBTQ advocacy, specifically a fairly accurate but slightly limited account of the Stonewall Riots, it is still inadequate in its portrayal of the different types of advocacy from members of the LGBTQ community. The textbook fails to mention important advocates and groups that fought for LGBTQ rights, and instead focuses on advocacy groups that were more limited to advancing the rights of gay men, instead of all members of the LGBTQ community. Textbooks should focus on the many different parts of the LGBTQ movement including different sects that were made during the gay rights movement, the interaction of the gay rights movement with other social movements, and should stop erasing the fact that certain historical figures were queer.

*U.S. History* gives a brief overview of the LGBTQ rights movement in the 1970s. The section describes the advent of the gay rights movement, as well as the Stonewall Riots and the aftereffects of it. The section starts off by mentioning that the gay rights movement was established mainly in cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco, both a hotspot for former military members who were discharged for being gay (Corbett). The textbook then goes on to talk about one of the most important moments in LGBTQ history: the Stonewall Riots. The Stonewall Riots took place “early in the morning of June 28, 1969” when “police raided a ... gay bar called the Stonewall inn” and “prepared to arrest many of the customers, especially transsexuals and cross-dressers, who were particular targets for police harassment.” While raids like this one were commonplace, that night the patrons of the bar fought back against the police, throwing “beer bottles and bricks” at them, and causing them to “barricade themselves inside the bar and wait for reinforcements.” The riots continued throughout the night and were “resumed the following night” (Corbett 891).

*U.S. History* does a good job of describing the Stonewall Riots as an isolated event, but does fail to mention a key instigator in the riots, Marsha P. Johnson, a transgender woman of color who was well known throughout her lifetime for her advocacy for gay and transgender rights. At Stonewall, she was said to be “organizing, agitating, and resisting” during the multi-night riots and some sources said that she was even the instigator of the entire affair (Hunter; Brown). The erasure of this important figure in LGBTQ history is harmful because it makes the discussion of LGBTQ rights Eurocentric, or focused mainly on white members of the LGBTQ community, which is inadequate when

the LGBTQ community is made up of a diverse range of people of all races. This erasure is especially harmful as violence against transgender people, particularly transgender women of color, persists as an issue in current day America.

The textbook then goes on to discuss the formation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activists' Alliance (GAA) saying they were founded to “protest discrimination, homophobia, and violence against gay people” (Corbett 891). While these two groups were important in bringing attention to LGBTQ rights, there were many more organizations that were founded, on the basis of intersectionality, or making sure every member of the LGBTQ community was represented, not just white gay men. One of these organizations was founded by the previously mentioned transgender activist Marsha P. Johnson. She, along with Sylvia Rivera, formed the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) which “worked to end homelessness among young queens, trans, and gay people, organizing for space, advocacy, and survival” (Hunter). Both of them left the Gay Activists' Alliance to form STAR because they “found themselves, and issues of gender identity, excluded” (Bronski 211).

Although they originally left to help transgender people — a group they did not feel like was being adequately represented — they ended up also helping gay individuals. Instead of STAR being an organization for transgender people and the Gay Activists' Alliance being one for gay people, STAR aimed to be an organization for every member of the LGBTQ community. This important and intersectional group being left out of history textbooks, in favor of one that did not advocate for every member of the LGBTQ community, shows the

shortcomings of textbooks representing the LGBTQ community. *U.S. History* fails to mention the shortcomings of these more mainstream groups, mainly their lack of intersectionality. Additionally, the textbook has the same issues that these groups did by not including transgender activists in their discussion of the LGBTQ rights movement. By not mentioning transgender people or the organizations founded by transgender people, *U.S. History* limits its scope to a narrow sect of the LGBTQ community that is not truly demonstrative of the entire community. The LGBTQ community is made up of more than just gay people — hence the "T" in LGBTQ — and has advocates of people from different races. Therefore, by excluding both Marsha P. Johnson and STAR in its discussion of LGBTQ people *U.S. History* fails in its discussion of the LGBTQ rights movement.

Another group that felt disenfranchised with groups like GFL and GAA were women. Lesbian women not only felt excluded from gay rights organizations, but also from feminist movements. The National Organization of Women (NOW) led by Betty Friedan, in 1971 claimed that “lesbian rights were a legitimate concern for feminism” meaning that she believed lesbian women advocating for lesbian rights would be a threat for straight women advocating for women’s rights (207). In gay rights groups headed by men, women felt excluded because “their actions, even after lesbians confronted them, often reflected their upbringing, which was not to take women and their concerns seriously” (212). Being too female for gay rights groups and too gay for women’s groups, lesbian activists had no choice but to form their own separate movement advocating for both feminist and lesbian rights.

Lesbian feminist groups like The Lavender Menace, whose name later changed to Radicalesbians, led the movement for this type of change. This group in particular focused on working from within the women's rights movement with other lesbians to advocate for their needs as gay women (Rapp). More broadly, lesbian feminists worked on issues relating to gay rights including trying to change the idea that being attracted to one's own gender was a mental illness, and fighting the legal discrimination of lesbian relationship as compared to heterosexual relationships. On the issue of women's rights advocacy, lesbian feminists "set up health clinics, created grassroots political organizations, and instituted a widespread national network of communal living collectives that, although unaffiliated, saw themselves as part of a movement" (Bronski 213). All of these contributions that women made to the gay rights movement are not included in *U.S History*. Additionally, the work of lesbian feminists are not included in its discussion of the women's rights movement the 1970s. Once again this textbook fails to include discussion of all members of the LGBT community, and instead falls into a male-centric version of history. It is important to note that many gay rights advocacy groups were not perfect in their promotion of LGBT rights. Even groups like Radicalesbians were not perfect in their intersection, claiming that bisexuality was not real and hindered the type of advocacy lesbian feminists were trying to fight for (Bronski). The idea that any social group was perfect in their fight for equal rights is untrue, and these shortcomings, as well as the people and groups who tried to address these shortcoming, should be acknowledged in textbooks in their discussion of gay rights.

Another fact omitted in *U.S History* is how different social movements of the 70s interacted either to advocate for or dismiss other groups. Additionally, issues traditionally associated with only one social movement group had unintended reactions of helping other social groups. For example, the invention of the birth control pill is widely regarded as helping the cause of women's rights because it gave women control over their ability to reproduce, which furthermore helped them gain control of their sexual, personal and economic freedom. However, as Bronski points out in *A Queer History of the United States*, it also led to more social acceptance of same sex couples.

Because birth control "made the operation between sex and reproduction socially acceptable" (207), it negated the point that homosexual activity was wrong because it does not lead to reproduction. Although the invention of the birth control pill did not help LGBTQ people gain more legal rights, the impact it had on the way people viewed sex ended up laying the grounds for homosexuality to be more socially accepted. This example is just one of many of when new advocacy groups interacted during the major social changes in the 1970s, and new social views impacted multiple disadvantaged groups. The gay rights movement and Black liberation groups also interacted and sometimes supported each other, with the Black Panthers Party specifically interacting with gay rights organizations. One of these interactions occurred when the GLF discussed donating money to the Black Panthers Party, causing a split between the GLF and GAA (Bronski). In response to the GLF's support, the chairman of the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton, called for "form[ing] a working coalition with the gay liberation and women's liberation groups" (216).

Bronski notes that this “comprehensive vision of social justice was mired in Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘no one is free, until everyone is free’” (212). These types of interactions are important to note in textbooks, as without them we tend to think of the gay rights movement as all male and white, the civil rights movement as all male and straight, and the women’s rights movement all white and straight. In reality, there were interacting identities in all of these movements, as there is today, which *U.S History* fails to recognize.

Another way that *U.S History* fails to adequately discuss queer history is in its erasure of the sexuality of prominent historical figures. The textbook mentions that Franklin Delano Roosevelt had an affair with his secretary (Corbett 781), but fails to mention that Eleanor Roosevelt, his wife, also had extramarital affairs, including one with a woman named Lorena Hickok (Bronski 149). Literary journalist Claire Nichols claims that “in media reports and history books, the two women have often been described as ‘close friends’” but then goes on to cite author Amy Bloom as saying “there is no doubt they were in love.” Bloom, who has read the 3,000 public letters Eleanor and Lorena sent to each other throughout their lives, believes that historians fail to bring up this affair because “it might be that what we find very hard to believe is the idea that if you are an important and iconic female figure ... it is impossible to think that you would have any other interests except being a good mother to the entire nation” (qtd. in Nichols). The idea of Eleanor Roosevelt having interests besides serving the country would be a transformative one, and if those interests were to additionally break the mold of heteronormativity, they would be even less likely to be put in a textbook.

We often see historical writings and biographies as stagnant and set in stone, but in reality people learn new information every day; records are released, wills containing historical artifacts give information to a whole new group of people and researchers come across sources previously skipped over. It makes sense that it was not public knowledge that Eleanor Roosevelt had an affair with another woman in the 40s when it was happening, or even up until the 1970s when the letters were made public (Nichols), but since then there has been primary source documents that show the romantic relationship between Roosevelt and Hickok. When letters with excerpts like “I ache to hold you close. Your ring is of great comfort. I look at it and think she does love me, or I wouldn’t be wearing it” or “I want to put my arms around you and kiss you at the corner of your mouth” are easily available to the public, it seems like it should be more common knowledge that Eleanor Roosevelt had this same sex affair (Nichols).

Although it might not seem necessary to talk about Eleanor Roosevelt’s sexuality if she were to be discussed only in terms of her political career, the textbook goes into the personal and romantic life of the Roosevelts, so it seems strange that this fact is omitted. This omission seems to be driven by heterocentrism, or the idea of omitting facts about queer people either because it is uncomfortable to talk about, or because of plain homophobia. Similar views can be seen with the portrayal of James Buchanan, who is often referred to as America’s only unmarried president, though scholars who have read personal letters he sent think that he was our first gay president (Balcerski). Additionally, when textbooks fail to address that historical figures were in same sex relationships, they promote the idea that being gay or



transgender is a phenomenon that has only occurred recently. This fact is blatantly untrue, as evident by these two figures, and can make it seem like people recently have chosen to be gay, when in reality people have chosen to be *open* about being gay.

The inclusion of any type of queer history is important, so *U.S. History* does exceed expectations in that way; however, it fails to portray different types of identities among members of the LGBTQ community, and tends to ignore lesbian women and transgender people in favor of gay men. Moving forward, textbooks should try to approach the LGBTQ movement in the 70s from a more intersectional point of view, and discuss the different interactions of all of the social movements in the 70s. In addition to this change, textbooks should stop erasing the fact that important historical figures were part of the LGBTQ community, especially in instances where they discuss the figure's personal and romantic life.

One way authors should approach writing about the LGBTQ rights movement is to look at the acronym and make sure that they are including discussion about all the types of people that are mentioned in that acronym: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. It is very easy to overlook the contributions of one of these groups of people, and instead fall into only discussing the contributions that gay men made to the LGBTQ rights movement. However, with this check in place authors can be more aware of whose perspective they are prioritizing when writing about the movement. Although sometimes any portrayal of queer history can feel like a win, it must be insured that the discussion of LGBTQ people is done in a way as not to exclude different members of the community.

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