

Sexualities

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

For many years, histories of sexuality were typically pursued outside of universities' history departments. Many activists in the feminist and lesbian and gay* movements of the 1970s and 1980s became historians and archivists outside the traditional structures of academia, researching the past for evidence of people like themselves, and recording and preserving their own activism for future generations. Since the 1990s, queer history has challenged some of these earlier approaches. Building on the work of queer theorists in philosophy, literature and critical theory, queer historians question the idea of a coherent 'gay' or 'lesbian' identity in the past – before terms such as 'gay', 'lesbian' or 'LGBTQ+' existed, and before who you had sex with was viewed as being an inherent part of your identity. This annotated bibliography highlights influential texts representing a variety of different approaches to the history of sexuality, published between the 1970s and the present day.

Introductory texts

Regina Kunzel, 'Review Essay: The Power of Queer History', *American Historical Review*, 123:5 (2018).

This essay offers a comprehensive review of the field of LGBT/queer history – its activist origins and impulses, as well as more recent developments.

- * The movement for sexual minority rights was generally described as 'gay' or 'lesbian and gay' in the 1970s and 1980s, before bisexual, trans and queer activists prompted the adoption of more inclusive terms like 'LGBTQ+'.

The essay focuses primarily on American scholarship but is useful to readers outside the US too – as Kunzel argues, ‘sexuality has never been fully constrained by geographical boundaries or state borders’ (p. 1575), and histories of sexuality are increasingly transnational too. Kunzel usefully highlights the vibrancy and range of the field, as well as making a powerful argument for its importance to other historical scholarship, especially histories of policing and the state, capitalism, race and gender. Finally, the essay highlights how gender nonconformity was key to early ideas about homosexuality, and how as a result there is a close interrelationship between histories of sexuality and the vibrant and fast-growing field of trans history.

Chris Waters, ‘Distance and Desire in the New British Queer History’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14:1 (2008).

In the 1990s, there was a move away from earlier forms of lesbian and gay history that had sought to reclaim examples of lesbian and gay identity in the past. Influenced by the new concept of ‘queer theory’ that was already influential in literary studies and philosophy, queer history sought to destabilize categories of identity, rather than recover examples of them. It argued that categories of sexuality, and even the concept of a coherent ‘sexuality’ itself were social constructs that have changed and developed over time. In this review essay, Waters reviews four key works in what he terms ‘the new British queer history’, demonstrating the influence in Britain of trends that had already been ongoing in the US for several years. The ‘new British queer history’, he argues, rejects modern categories of identity like gay, lesbian or homosexual, and emphasizes the ways in which the past is very different from today.

Influential early works

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

The philosopher Michel Foucault is widely understood as one of the most influential early scholars in the history of sexuality. His *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* was published in France in 1976, followed by its first English translation in 1978. Foucault’s analysis concentrated primarily on how power and language have shaped understandings of sexuality. He criticized the popular idea that Victorians repressed sexuality, arguing instead that there was a huge amount of discussion of sexuality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scientists began to examine sexuality thoroughly, analysing different sexual behaviours and sorting people into categories on this basis – binding together sexual *acts* and sexual *identities* for the first time. In doing so, they helped to ‘create’ many of the sexual categories we use today.

There have been several criticisms of Foucault’s work. For example, several historians have argued that his methods are not truly historical – he

is more interested in understanding the relationship between the past and the present than he is in finding and analysing concrete historical evidence. His work can also be challenging, rewarding careful reading that may take a long time. However, the influence of his work is undeniable. This volume was originally intended to be the first in a six-part series, but Foucault's death in 1984 meant that ultimately only four volumes appeared, the last of which was published posthumously.

Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in Carole Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, MA: Routledge, 1984).

Rubin's path-breaking essay made one of the first arguments for a specific field of 'sexuality studies', which would focus on the relationship between sexuality and power. Rubin focused her analysis on how sexuality is organized into a hierarchical system, where a 'charmed circle' of 'good' (heterosexual, married, 'vanilla') sexuality is sharply differentiated from 'bad, abnormal' sexuality. The essay is a product of its time, as Rubin was writing in response to 1980s 'sex panics' against pornography and BDSM. One aspect that is jarring to modern readers is her discussion of age, specifically what she describes as 'cross-generational encounters', which Rubin discusses alongside homosexuality, fetishes and BDSM. More recent analyses have critiqued and clarified this aspect of Rubin's analysis: however, for all its problems the essay is still seen as a foundational text for sexuality studies and histories of sexuality.

Other reading:

Gayle Rubin, 'Blood Under the Bridge: Reflections on "Thinking Sex"', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17:1 (2011).

This later article reflects on some of the criticisms and historical context for Rubin's original chapter.

Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey (eds), *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Penguin, 1989).

This edited collection represents an early focus of histories of sexuality – that is, overcoming earlier efforts to censor or repress lesbian and gay history by 'reclaiming' gay and lesbian figures or practices in the past. The book uses the language of 'gay and lesbian' (rather than LGBT or LGBTQ) because this was the most common terminology at the time of publication, and within the 1970s and 1980s activist movements from which early gay and lesbian history emerged. The chapters illuminate different examples of gay and lesbian life in places like ancient Athens, Renaissance Italy, and nineteenth-century English boarding schools in what the editors themselves

characterize as a ‘first phase’ of gay and lesbian history. The book argues that understanding gay and lesbian history is important not just for gay and lesbian people themselves, but also to enrich the wider discipline of history.

Broadening perspectives: the 1990s

Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

As a result of its activist origins, histories of sexuality were initially dominated by histories of marginalized sexuality, typically gay or lesbian, as shown above. However, paralleling the move from women’s history to gender history (including more dedicated analysis of men and masculinity), before long, historians also began to consider how more socially accepted or ‘normative’ sexualities *also* have a history. This book was one of the first historical studies of heterosexuality. Katz challenges the idea that the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality has existed throughout time. In fact, he argues, heterosexuality as a distinct idea (what he calls a ‘different-sex erotic ideal’) is a fairly modern concept. Although relationships between men and women have existed throughout human history, being attracted to someone of a different gender has only relatively recently become understood as a key part of someone’s identity, with a distinct identity term and social approval and privileges.

Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

Histories of sexuality, as this bibliography shows, have primarily been focused on the modern era, for which there are far more surviving records and we can trace the beginnings of the categories and terminology we use today. However, there are some influential studies of sexuality in the pre-modern era. Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval* is one example. She combines historical, literary and queer approaches to examine well-known medieval texts like *The Canterbury Tales* and the diary of Margery Kempe through a queer lens. This involves linking non-normative sexualities to other kinds of marginalization, such as heresy, to explore why some types of sexual practices were normalized while others were condemned. Finally, Dinshaw explores how contemporary uses of language around ‘the medieval’ in productions like Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* reinforce heteronormative ideas about the past.

Other reading:

Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

Another example of histories of sexuality before the modern period.

New directions

Nadia Ellis, 'Black Migrants, White Queers, and the Archive of Inclusion in Postwar London', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 17:6 (2015).

This article explores the interrelationship between Blackness and queerness in mid-twentieth-century London. Ellis highlights how the legal inclusion of the (implicitly white) male homosexual, through the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, occurred at the same time as the legal exclusion of the Black colonial immigrant through anti-immigration laws. This created a strict separation between 'Black' and 'queer', making it difficult or impossible to conceive of Black men who were also queer. The first half of the article considers social science literature, which tried to delineate an 'acceptable' (i.e. straight) Black subject, and the second considers an oral history interview with the Caribbean dancer Richie Riley, who, despite being interviewed for a 'gay and lesbian' project, did not mention the words 'gay', 'lesbian' or 'queer'.

Other reading:

Laurie Marhoefer, *Racism and the Making of Gay Rights: A Sexologist, His Student and the Empire of Queer Love* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

This book highlights how racism was part of the modern gay rights movement from its inception, in the work of leading sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld.

Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Today, there is often a strict separation between 'gender' and 'sexuality', neatly captured by the saying 'sexuality is who you go to bed *with*, gender is who you go to bed *as*'. However, as this book highlights, the two have historically been more closely linked. Manion explains this through the example of 'female husbands', a term widespread in Britain and the US between the 1750s and early 1900s to refer to people assigned female at birth who assumed the legal, social and economic position of 'the husband'. Should female husbands be considered examples of lesbian, trans or non-binary history? Manion argues that *any* of these understandings could be true, and they are not mutually exclusive – sexuality, gender and economic and social power were all so closely linked in this period that it is impossible to neatly separate them. The book therefore highlights the relevance of trans history to sexualities scholarship.

Other reading:

Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (London: John Murray Press, 2023).

This book looks at examples of gender non-conformity from around the world, in a wide range of different time periods.

Alison Oram and Matt Cook, *Queer Beyond London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

Queer histories have often been focused on major or capital cities (see, for example, Matt Houlbrook's *Queer London*, George Chauncey's *Gay New York* and Matt Cook's *London and the Culture of Homosexuality*), perpetuating a narrative that these places are the only ones with a vibrant 'queer scene'. In this book, Cook and Oram seek to dismantle this myth by exploring LGBTQ lives in four other English cities – Brighton, Leeds, Manchester and Plymouth – from 1965 to 2015. The authors argue that attention to queer lives beyond London doesn't simply add to, but can also complicate, our existing understanding of LGBTQ+ history. This can be seen, for example, in the case of Plymouth, whose naval and maritime history mean that key 'queer milestones' such as the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 had relatively little impact.

Conclusion

In recent years, sexualities scholarship has broadened from its original basis in lesbian and gay studies to explore 'normative' identities like heterosexuality, as well as the role of sexuality in more private, domestic spaces, in contrast to earlier histories which focused on more obviously 'influential' areas like activism, politics and subcultures. The fast-growing field of trans history has also influenced histories of sexuality, prompting more detailed analysis of the close interrelationship between gender and sexuality. Finally, historians are increasingly examining the ways in which factors like race, class and location complicate and diversify what 'sexuality' means to different people in different periods.