

Stonewall National Monument  
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***Reflection on the National Significance of the Stonewall Riots***

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I first learned about the Stonewall Riots in a U.S. history class that I took in college in the 1990s. We read Martin Duberman's pathbreaking book *Stonewall*, which in 1994 had recently been issued in paperback. This was the first time that I and most of my classmates learned anything at all about the LGBTQ rights movement in school. The story of the Stonewall Riots fit well within the broader context of the course on America in the 1960s, a period of great social upheaval and protest. Activists in the Civil Rights Movement for racial justice and the Anti-War Movement openly challenged policing practices, unjust laws, and government authority. It made sense to me as a young student that momentum from one movement would spill over and inspire other movements. And so it was that people who belonged to a much despised and heavily stigmatized minority--commonly referred to as homosexuals--began to feel that they too could fight back, using political advocacy, educational campaigns, and public protest to do so.<sup>1</sup>

Much has been made of a shift in consciousness among LGBTQ people during the 1970s from one of shame to one of pride; from a people who cowed at the sight of police officers raiding

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993). Also see John D'Emilio *Sexual Politics Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1983).

their bars to a people who fought back; from a people with everything to lose if they were 'outed' to a people who realize they in fact had nothing to begin with—no rights, no respect, no dignity—and therefore nothing to lose. Was Stonewall itself the catalyst for this transformation or did it earn such a designation upon later reflection? The answer to this question is complicated and speaks to the multiple ways that the general public, U.S. historians, LGBTQ people of all ages, and LGBTQ activists from the era relate to and learn about the Stonewall Riots.<sup>2</sup>

For those who were in the bar that night and others who joined the crowd in the streets outside for nights to come, the energy of the community was electric and life-changing. New people flocked to longstanding homophile organizations, calling for a change in tactics and attitude seemingly overnight. Activist and social groups proliferated in major cities and even smaller ones, too. Yes, Stonewall was a catalyst.<sup>3</sup>

Long before Stonewall and in many different parts of the country, however, LGBTQ people came together to socialize, advocate, and educate, from nineteenth-century gender-bending performances, to turn of the century speakeasies and house parties, to mid-century editorial meetings of the early gay and lesbian press, to gatherings of sex-workers in resistance and

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<sup>2</sup> Early important histories include Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Crowell, 1976); Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (Plum, 1990); Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1990: An Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> David Cater, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (St. Martin's Press, 2004); Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

solidarity, to the organized and visible protests of homophile groups.<sup>4</sup> Sexual and gender minorities have formed community and fought back against the major institutions that have oppressed them, including religious organizations, the medical community, local, state, and federal governments, and an extensive body of laws that criminalized many aspects of our lives. Despite an abundance of great scholarship on the dynamic histories of gender and sexual minority people and communities from even the earliest decades of our nation's founding, few are aware of this dynamic and troubling past.

U.S. history textbooks and curriculum have only recently begun to include references to an LGBTQ past.<sup>5</sup> Historians and editors agreed that Stonewall was the single most important event in LGBTQ community history. The Stonewall Riot is not only the placeholder for the LGBTQ rights movement but is often the only mention of LGBTQ people in U.S. history textbooks. Stonewall marks the beginning of mainstream America's recognition of our very existence in public life. Through it, we are associated with and defined by cities, nightlife, and illicit activities. We are an interracial community of street hustlers, workers, professionals, and students who are gay, trans, gender nonconforming, lesbian, bisexual, femme, butch, queens, and bears. In this remembering, it is as if we rose from the ashes one night to fight the police and thereafter were accepted and assimilated into modern American culture, culminating in the legalization of same-sex marriage. But Stonewall's significance was far from clear at this

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<sup>4</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic, 1995); Marc Stein, *City Of Sisterly And Brotherly Loves: Lesbian And Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: U Chicago, 2000); Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (2006); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Seal Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Jen Manion, "The Absence of Context: Queer Politics Without a Past," *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ World Making*, (2014), 1 no. 2 (2014), 115-131.

time. Rather, its rise in prominence and designation as the origin of the modern LGBTQ rights movement was earned later, upon reflection and commemoration, after two decades of struggle and political advocacy for LGBTQ rights. Its role in historical memory far exceeds its role as a catalyst for social change at the time.

Stonewall is most frequently commemorated as a starting point—with New York at the center—but must be remembered within a broader and older national context. After reading a book about Stonewall in the 1990s, I never thought much about it again. How could this be if Stonewall is as important as everyone says it is? I will elaborate on three reasons that I—and many others—think of Stonewall’s significance as a matter of historic memory more than as a singular catalyst for change.

First, I am not a New Yorker. Stonewall has been made into a national story, much as New York is heralded as America’s great city. Other protests by trans and queer people against discrimination and police harassment, from Philadelphia’s Dewey’s Diner in 1965 to Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966, are of vital importance to communities in those cities but have never been given the same national significance. Living in Philadelphia, I began to learn of the organizing efforts of the 1950s and 1960s, including the Annual Reminder protests in front of Independence Hall. Major cities all across the country from San Francisco to Chicago to Washington DC to Miami to LA have rich and important historic legacies which anchor LGBTQ

communities and inspire transformative activism just as much as—and sometimes more than—Stonewall.<sup>6</sup>

Second, there is no singular LGBTQ rights movement. Rather, I came out in the 1990s into a community of lesbian feminists who were deeply committed to anti-racist politics and thinking critically about the interconnectedness of structural oppression.<sup>7</sup> Writers such as Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Angela Davis, Cherrie Moraga, Dorothy Allison, Patricia Hill Collins, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Gloria Anzaldua helped me to think about LGBTQ rights and issues in a broad and intersectional way. From this vantage point, the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement—which by then was heralding Stonewall as its point of origin—was not doing enough to address how racism, classism, and sexism shaped our lives as LGBTQ people. Many LGBTQ writers and activists were anchored in racial justice and women’s rights groups, aspiring to do transformative and integrated social justice work. Sometimes this work and alignment was a response to the dominance of gay white men in leadership of the LGBTQ movement, who were more likely to advocate a narrow, single issue approach to gay rights.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nan Boyd *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (University of California, 2005); Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970* (Chicago: U Chicago, 2006); Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian L.A. and the Making of Modern Politics* (University of California, 2008); C. Todd White, *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights* (University of Illinois, 2009); Timothy Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Julio Capo, *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer Miami before 1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Lesbian culture and communities have been both separate from and intermixed with gay male and transgender subcultures. See Lillian Faderman *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia U, 1991); Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> See Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor 1995) and Kevin Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the Aids Crisis* (UNC, 2016).

Third, as a historian of the carceral state and the long-ago past, reflecting on Stonewall makes me think about the centuries of unjust laws, government discrimination, and police brutality against LGBTQ people.<sup>9</sup> Religious views often shaped laws, and these laws served to justify medical diagnoses that deemed us unfit parents, teachers, neighbors, workers, and citizens. The legacy of these cruel and discriminatory values lives on all around us.<sup>10</sup> Religious leaders still condemn us. Families still reject us. Police still harass us. Medical providers refuse to treat us. The impact of these cruel and discriminatory values is even more pronounced in the lives of youth, elderly, poor, incarcerated, immigrant, racial minority, and transgender people. For example, over 40% incarcerated women in the U.S. are sexual minorities.<sup>11</sup> A whopping 16% of transgender adults have been in prison or jail, over five times the rate for all adults.<sup>12</sup> A devastating 44% of LGB youth report being threatened, injured, or bullied at school and nearly one-third of them attempted suicide.<sup>13</sup> LGBTQ elderly people face higher poverty rates, greater economic insecurity, greater isolation, and significant health disparities compared to straight people.<sup>14</sup> The list goes on. If Stonewall is first and foremost a story of LGBTQ people challenging police harassment and unjust laws that criminalized same-sex intimacies, cross-dressing, and

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<sup>9</sup> David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: U Chicago, 2006); Joey L. Mogul, Andrea Ritchie, Kay Whitlock, *Queer Injustice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* (Beacon Press, 2011); Jen Manion, *Liberty's Prisoners: Carceral Culture in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGBT-Discrimination-and-Harassment-in-Law-Enforcement-March-2015.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/incarceration-rate-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-people-three-times-the-general-population/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://transequality.org/issues/resources/standing-lgbt-prisoners-advocate-s-guide-ending-abuse-and-combating-imprisonment>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sageusa.org/issues/general.cfm>

our public gatherings, then we must attend not only to the origins of these laws but also their legacies.<sup>15</sup>

We have begun to see the LGBTQ community as one that has secured a fair number of “rights” in a relatively short period of time. Federal recognition of same-sex marriage, achieved in 2015 with the decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, is seen as the crowning achievement of forty years of legal advocacy.<sup>16</sup> It’s important to celebrate same-sex marriage as a tremendously significant civil rights gain. But in illuminating the central themes and context for Stonewall, the through line leads not to marriage but really to what has defined the criminalization of same-sex desire for centuries: sodomy and cross-dressing. Laws against sodomy are older than the country itself and can be found in statutes of the American colonies. Their impact and enforcement varied but they were used robustly in the twentieth century to terrorize, shame, and blackmail people with same-sex desire. Even in the 1980s and 1990s after significant civil rights gains, the criminalization of sodomy was used to deny LGBTQ people parental custody, adoption rights, employment protections, hospital visitation, relationship recognition, and access to public accommodations. The laws against sodomy were finally overturned nationally by the 2003 Supreme Court Case *Lawrence v. Texas*.<sup>17</sup> With that, our love was no longer a crime. Anti-cross dressing laws were widely introduced in cities across the country throughout the nineteenth century. They have been used to punish stigmatize, marginalize, and oppress a whole host of

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<sup>15</sup> William N. Eskridge, Jr. *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556\\_3204.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> <https://epic.org/privacy/gender/lawrencectx.pdf>

people including transsexuals, drag queens, sex workers, butches, studs, AGs, lesbians, and other transgender/gender nonconforming people. While the ordinances themselves have been overthrown, the debate over the rights of non-binary, gender non-conforming, and transgender people to participate in civic life and utilize public accommodations in accordance with their gender identity has only just begun. The fight for liberation from gender and sexual norms was at the heart of the Stonewall Riots—and it lives on in the transgender rights movement of today.