

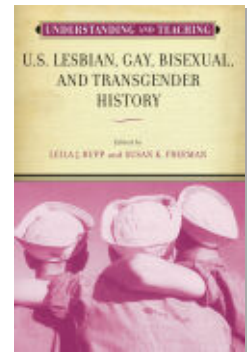


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Queer History Goes Digital

Using Outhistory.org in the Classroom

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Since its inception in the early 1990s, digital history has evolved into an exciting and dynamic field.¹ Historical websites provide unparalleled access to resources and materials to help scholars, teachers, and students engage with and understand the past. Online resources are particularly useful when studying emerging subfields, such as LGBT history, that lack the stature or presence of long-standing traditional disciplines. As a relatively young field, LGBT history is still developing and not embedded in most history and social studies curricula. As such, scholarship and sources on the queer past are generally not easily or widely accessible. The Web has helped to change that. Indeed, LGBT history has joined the digital age, and an incredible range of resources are now available online, providing unique opportunities for teachers and students to access and learn about the queer past.²

This essay focuses on Outhistory.org, the premier site for LGBT history on the Web.³ Founded in 2003 by gay historian Jonathan Ned Katz, Outhistory.org boasts rich collections on the LGBT past that are particularly well suited for classroom use.⁴ Focused on the United States, the website features an array of community histories, biographies, digitized archival material, oral histories, and primary sources from the precolonial era to the present, providing essential resources for classroom teachers. With a simple click, teachers and students can investigate, conceptualize, and contribute to the making of the LGBT past.

This essay focuses on some highlights from the site selected specifically with college and high school teachers in mind. Many of the suggestions outlined here are ones that I have used in college classrooms, and most can easily be adapted for high school classrooms. The possibilities of Outhistory are numerous and ever changing, as the community-based site is always expanding with new material created and added by site visitors. This unique user participation feature is another exciting way to incorporate Outhistory into the classroom. Students can contribute material to the site and thus engage in the production of historical knowledge, becoming not just consumers but also makers of history.

To guide teachers in their use of Outhistory, I begin by focusing on two major types of sources that the site offers: primary sources and community histories. I then highlight several examples of user-created content, demonstrating how students have effectively participated in history making. It is my hope that this brief survey of the website will orient and inspire teachers and scholars to take advantage of its distinctive features and myriad possibilities for creatively engaging students with queer history.

Primary Sources

With Outhistory, students are able to easily access primary sources, as well as read additional commentary by collectors and historians about the sources. These editorial notes are useful for classroom conversations about the making, collecting, and writing of LGBT history. Three of the primary source collections are especially well suited for use in history survey courses, and below I provide an overview and suggest classroom exercises for each.

The collection titled "Native Americans/Gay Americans 1528–1976" (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/native-americans-gay-americans>) is adapted from Jonathan Ned Katz's 1976 primary source reader, *Gay American History*.⁵ This collection is instructive for students of U.S. and LGBT history in multiple ways. First, it provides essential primary sources on European and indigenous contact in the Americas. Using these sources, students in standard U.S. history courses can see how concerns around sexuality and sexual customs prominently figured in European discourses and actions in response to indigenous peoples. Europeans justified their conquest of indigenous peoples partially by pointing to what they deemed the natives' sinful and perverse sexual

customs. In my classes, I've had students pick five primary sources and consider the following questions.

1. Who wrote the document? Whose perspective are we getting?
2. How did newcomers respond to the gender and sexual customs of indigenous peoples?
3. What words does the author use to describe indigenous peoples and practices?
4. What can we learn from these documents? How do the biases of the authors inform what we can know?

These questions are useful when compiled as a worksheet to be used as either an in-class activity or a take-home assignment that students complete in advance of group discussion.

"Native Americans/Gay Americans" is also productive for thinking about the development of the scholarship on LGBT history. When Katz compiled *Gay American History*, gay and lesbian scholars were in the very early stages of creating and recording a cohesive and viable gay past. This was also a time when very little historical scholarship existed on indigenous peoples from their own perspectives. In his 1976 introduction to the sources, reproduced on Outhistory, Katz attributed an identity of "gay" or "lesbian" to his subjects. What might have seemed appropriate in his historical context is less so today. In the decades since, Native American scholars and activists have developed a prolific scholarship on traditional indigenous gender and sexual systems.⁶ The newer scholarship departs significantly from both early European accounts of the indigenous "berdache" and 1970s accounts of native homosexuality or cross-dressing. Since then we have come to recognize that the majority of the people described in Katz's documents were not "homosexual" but are better understood as Two-Spirit, occupying an identity category not based on sexuality but on gender, occupation, or spirituality.⁷ Katz's introduction, then, is itself a historical document and provides a unique way for students to see the evolution of the field of LGBT history. Questions students might consider are:

1. How does Katz define the sexual and gendered identities of the people who are described in the primary sources?
2. Considering Katz's historical context, what assumptions does he

make and why? How would you rewrite Katz's introduction today?

While Katz's collection offers critical perspectives on the contact period, a significant portion of the content available on Outhistory focuses on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Earl Lind's partial memoir *The Riddle of the Underworld* (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/earl-lind>), for example, offers students a rare firsthand account of the gender-nonconforming experience in the early twentieth century. *Riddle* is the last of a trilogy of memoirs written between 1919 and 1922 by Earl Lind, aka Ralph Werther, aka Jennie June, a self-described "androgynous." While Lind's first two memoirs are available in print, *Riddle* is only available on Outhistory. The three works of the trilogy stand as one of the earliest accounts of what we might today identify as "transgender" experience in the United States.

Riddle is a useful text for considering the construction of sexual and gendered identities and how identity categories and terminology change over time. Lind understood themselves⁸ to be bisexual; in their context, this meant a person who was both male and female. In their words, "I was foreordained to live part of my life as a man and part as woman." Students will recognize the very different use of the term *bisexual* during Lind's time compared to our own. In addition, Lind identified as an *androgynous*, a term never encountered today, while terms such as *gay* and *transgender* are absent from the memoir. Using *Riddle*, students can see how terms appear and disappear, and that no identity category is inevitable. The narrative challenges students to think critically about constructions of sex and gender, both historically and currently, and to consider the problems of attributing modern labels to historical actors. Questions to consider include:

1. How does Lind self-identify? What evidence (physical, psychic, etc.) do they use to base that identity?
2. How is Lind's gendered identity connected to their understanding of their sexual identity?
3. Based on the memoir, what can we learn about the dominant understandings of sex, sexuality, and sexual behavior at this time?
4. How does Lind name and describe different kinds of sexual and gendered identities?

5. What do we learn about urban life and the sexual subcultures in large American cities at this time period?
6. What kind of lives had so-called sexual deviants made for themselves by the early twentieth century?

Linked to the manuscript is Drexel University professor Randall Sell's account of finding *Riddle of the Underworld* in 2010 (<http://out.history.org/exhibits/show/earl-lind/related>). Sell describes the process of searching for and collecting LGBT-related materials as a graduate student in the 1990s. He haphazardly discovered a portion of Lind's third memoir tucked in an unrelated manuscript collection at the National Library of Medicine. With Sell's account, students get a firsthand look at the often unexpected and surprising turns of historical research. Students will also recognize that the history of LGBT experience is still very much in the making.

For the gay liberation era, Outhistory features all but one of the nine-issue run of one of the first gay liberation movement periodicals in the United States, *Come Out!* (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/come-out-magazine-1969-1972/the-come-out-archive>).⁹ Originally published by the Gay Liberation Front in New York City between 1969 and 1972, the digitized collection gives students direct access to gay liberation in its formative years.¹⁰ In a standard U.S. history course, teachers can assign *Come Out!* as part of a unit on the social movements of the 1950s–70s. The content of the magazine not only gives students an in-depth look at gay liberation, but it also clearly demonstrates the connections between progressive movements of the time. Students will be able to recognize the antiracist, socialist, and feminist perspectives found in many of the articles throughout the nine-issue run of *Come Out!*

The availability of multiple issues makes *Come Out!* an ideal source for group work. As either a classroom activity or a homework assignment, split students into small groups. Each group member should pick one issue of the magazine to read. Have students answer questions about their issues and then reconvene as a group to discuss their findings. Questions for students to consider as they are reading the magazine include:

1. What were some of the political issues that the authors of *Come Out!* tackled?

2. What does *gay liberation* mean? Who does it include?
3. What other movements are discussed or represented in the magazine? What does this tell you?
4. What did you learn about the Gay Liberation Front by reading this magazine?
5. What did you learn about the early days of the gay liberation movement in New York City?

Questions for students to consider as a group include:

1. How did gay liberation change over time? What stayed the same and what did not?
2. Did any contested topics or new topics emerge in the magazine during this three-year time period?

Linked to the collection is Gay Liberation Front member and *Come Out!* contributor Perry Brass's recollections about his own experiences coming out as a gay teen in the 1960s and later helping to create one of the seminal publications of the early gay liberation movement (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/coming-out-into-come-out/perrys-story>). Reading Brass's firsthand account gives students a view into gay life in the 1960s and 1970s, an insider's look at an early gay liberation organization, and the process by which *Come Out!* was created. With Brass's account, the magazine and the movement come to life in a unique way, helping students to understand how movements happen.

Outhistory features additional collections on Stonewall and the early gay liberation movement, including digitized copies of the Stonewall police reports (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/stonewall-riot-police-reports>) and a community history of gay liberation in New York City (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/gay-liberation-in-new-york-city>).

Community Histories

One of the many strengths of Outhistory is the wide range of community histories available on the site. These local histories introduce students to queer community formation and bring historical figures, activists, groups, and movements to life. Spanning the country from coast to coast, the community histories include both well-known

urban gay meccas, such as San Francisco, New York City, and Chicago, and areas less often recognized as significant in queer history, such as Las Vegas, Nevada; Bloomington, Indiana; and Richmond, Virginia. With these community histories students can examine queer life in local contexts and get a much more nuanced understanding of LGBT history and struggles for justice.

Much of the literature on trans history centers on male-to-female (MTF) experience. The collection “Man-i-fest: FTM Mentorship in San Francisco, 1976–2009,” provides a much-needed corrective to this (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/man-i-fest>). It focuses on the life and work of Lou Sullivan, a gay-identified transman who founded FTM International, the first female-to-male (FTM) organization in the country.¹¹ Sullivan became a mentor and leader in the FTM community, corresponding with FTM-identified individuals globally throughout the 1980s. Showcasing letters and selections from the organization’s *Gateway* newsletter, this collection gives students a firsthand look at how Sullivan mentored and advocated for the community. Sullivan is thought to be the first FTM to die of AIDS. His story thus provides an important alternative lens through which to view the AIDS crisis. The collection includes links to obscure interviews with Sullivan, now available as YouTube videos, where he discusses his transition and his struggle with AIDS. Questions for students to consider include:

1. What issues does Sullivan talk about in his letters to a correspondent named David?
2. Based on your reading of the *Gateway* newsletter, what were some key issues for FTMs at the time? What kinds of experiences and medical advice are transmen sharing with one another?
3. Why do you think newsletters such as *Gateway* were so important to the FTM community?

The collection “Queer Bronzeville: The History of African American Gays and Lesbians on Chicago’s South Side (1885–1985)” (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/queer-bronzeville>) looks at the development of queer culture over the course of the twentieth century in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood. Its coverage extends from the lives of masculine women blues singers of the 1920s to the emergence of gay liberation in the 1970s. I have used the “Queer Bronzeville” collection in my classes to introduce students to the early history of drag

balls, a particularly queer form of performance art.¹² The drag balls were wildly popular events, and by the 1950s they attracted thousands of straight and gay patrons in such cities as Chicago, New York, and Atlanta. The “Queer Bronzeville” collection includes substantial sections on early- to mid-twentieth-century drag and features transcripts of interviews with two female impersonators who performed at the time, Nancy Kelly and Jacques Cristion.

Students will be surprised to learn that beginning in the 1930s African American newspapers included fairly extensive coverage of drag balls. I have used the “Bronzeville Collection” as a prompt for students to do their own primary source research on drag balls in the black press, pointing them in particular to the *Chicago Defender*. First, I had students read the “Queer Bronzeville” collection and pick out search terms that they could use to find newspaper articles. They then conducted searches using the *Chicago Defender* online (available through ProQuest). This is a particularly useful exercise for helping students learn how to do historical research. As they conduct their research, they quickly realize that a search for “drag ball(s)” turns up almost no results. It is here that the search terms they identified while reading “Queer Bronzeville” (such as the names of people, places, or events) come into play. Once they enter terms such as “Valda Gray” or “Cabin Inn” or “Finnie’s Balls,” students find numerous articles. They are also challenged to consider the language used at the time. A search for “female impersonator,” for example, turns up dozens of articles, whereas a search for a more modern term such as “drag queen” turns up almost nothing. With this exercise, students get a sense of how to do research in historical newspapers; they are challenged to grapple with the issues that historians face as we delve into the past and to engage with the language of the era we are studying. As a prompt for primary source research and on its own, the “Queer Bronzeville” collection provides a rich community history that gives students a look at queer life and culture in its local context.

Many teachers will find on Outhistory a collection close to home; if not from their actual city or state, at least there is something with regional relevance to their students. From Las Vegas to Lincoln and Minneapolis to New York, the community histories on Outhistory give students an opportunity to understand the LGBT past on a local level, enriching their understanding of a national story that is far less unified than is often assumed.

History of the Community, for the Community, by the Community

One of the most exciting features of Outhistory is the opportunity for community members to contribute content to the website. When he proposed the site in 2003, Jonathan Ned Katz imagined a “democratic history-making project” that would engage the public in the production of historical knowledge.¹³ The result was an interactive website that allows users “to write history themselves or to upload materials from their personal collections.”¹⁴ Since Outhistory launched, the website has solicited contributions from scholars, activists, history aficionados, and students of LGBT history nationwide. The result is a website that reflects shared knowledge, rich in diversity and historical depth and breadth. Originally conceived using Wikimedia software, the Outhistory site is now built on Omeka, a user-friendly open-source web-publishing platform that makes uploading content easy. Students do not need to have any web design knowledge to contribute to the site, and the staff members at Outhistory, who vet all the material, are eager to assist.¹⁵

By encouraging community participation, the website provides a rare and unique opportunity for students to share in the production of knowledge and to publish their work online. There are dozens of ways in which students can participate in content creation. In one of my advanced history courses, for example, the students wrote biographies on historical trans, gender-nonconforming, or intersex individuals (they can be viewed at <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/tgi-bios/exhibit>). From the third-century Roman emperor Elagabalus to twentieth-century radical trans activist Sylvia Rivera, the collection covers a wide range of times and places, and it includes people both well known and mostly unknown in the historical record. My students did their own investigating to select a historical figure, pursued several months of research, and finally wrote and uploaded their biographies. They were encouraged to include images and links to other websites or videos on their final webpages.

Other college teachers have facilitated student contributions, providing new content for Outhistory while demonstrating how class projects might be structured. One such student project is the collection titled “LGBT Identities, Communities, and Resistance in North Carolina, 1945–2012” (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/nc-lgbt>). Produced

by students of David Palmer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the collection covers community histories from across this southern state. University of Michigan professor Esther Newton had the students in her Lesbian History course create a collection titled “Lesbians in the Twentieth Century” (<http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/lesbians-20th-century>). Newton’s students wrote entries on lesbian life from the 1920s to the beginning of the twenty-first century. These are a few of many ways in which students can get hands-on experience creating and publishing history. The staff at Outhistory welcomes your suggestions and ideas for student projects.

Conclusion

Since its inception in 2003, Outhistory has sought to bring the queer past to a national audience and to engage that audience in the practice of historical inquiry. The possibilities of Outhistory are far more than what can be contained in a short essay. It is my hope that this essay can serve as a reference guide and provide some groundwork on which teachers can build as they present the history of LGBT people and movements to their students. It is also my hope that the materials presented on Outhistory will encourage and inspire teachers and their students to think deeply and critically about historical evidence and the diversity of LGBT life across space and time.¹⁶

NOTES

1. For an excellent resource and guide to history online, see Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). The premier resource for digital history is the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, www.chnm.gmu.edu.

2. While there are thousands of LGBT websites—covering everything from dating to travel to retail to social support networks—I am referencing those sites, typically produced by historians or historical societies, that focus specifically on LGBT history.

3. Outhistory is certainly not the only queer history website available. In my research on queer history online, I have found many excellent sites with rich materials and resources for classroom use. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to focus on Outhistory for several reasons. First, the site is national in scope and thus allows teachers and students to get a sense of the broad range

of experiences that make up queer American history. Second, the site is not limited to any particular topic or interest and encompasses the broadest range of LGBT history from politics to popular culture, art to activism, and science to social life. Finally, I worked for one year as project coordinator for Outhistory, managing content and working on the site redesign. As such, I became very well acquainted with the resources available on Outhistory and, having used many of them in my classrooms, can speak to their utility firsthand.

In addition to Outhistory, educators, researchers, and students can access an incredible array of LGBT history resources online. Examples of excellent local history sites include www.chicagogayhistory.com (Chicago), www.glbthistorymuseum.com/joomla15/ (central Florida), www.historyproject.org (Boston), <http://www.centralpalgbtcenter.org/lgbt-history-project> (central Pennsylvania), and www.mkelgbthist.org (Milwaukee). Many LGBT archives, museums, and historical societies maintain websites featuring rich resources such as digitized exhibits and collections. These include the National Archive of Gay and Lesbian History (New York), www.gaycenter.org/community/archive; ONE Archives (Los Angeles), <http://www.onearchives.org>; GLBT Historical Society (San Francisco), www.glbthistory.org; Lesbian Herstory Archives (New York), www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org; Leather Archives and Museum (Chicago), <http://www.leatherarchives.org/home.htm> (see also its tumblr page at <http://leatherarchives.tumblr.com>); Latino GLBT History Project (Washington, DC), <http://www.latinoglbthistory.org/home>; National LGBT Museum (Washington, DC), <http://nationallgbtmuseum.org/#/home/>; Tucson Gay Historical Society (Tucson), www.tucsongayhistoricalsociety.org; and Pop-Up Museum of Queer History, <http://www.queermuseum.com> (see also its tumblr page at <http://queermuseum.tumblr.com>, which features a rich collection of queer history, mostly focused on people and events in New York City). Websites dealing with specific LGBT interests include the LGBT Religious Archives Network, <http://www.lgbtran.org/index.aspx>; and Queer Music Heritage, <http://queermusicheritage.us>. Also of interest is <http://www.glbtc.com>, an online encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer culture, which includes both contemporary and historical coverage.

4. For an excellent article on the creation and evolution of Outhistory, see Lauren Jae Gutterman, "Outhistory.org: An Experiment in LGBTQ Community History-Making," *Public Historian* 32, no. 4 (November 2010): 96–109.

5. Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976).

6. I have found selected essays in Sue Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), to be incredibly useful in the classroom.

7. See Sabine Lang, "Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People: Gender Variance and Homosexuality in Native American Communities," in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, ed. Sue Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

8. I use the gender-neutral plural in place of a gendered singular pronoun since Lind/Werther/June occupied different genders at various points in their life.

9. This digitized collection is exclusive to Outhistory. The magazine is otherwise only available via microfiche or in archival collections.

10. The Gay Liberation Front was formed within a month of the Stonewall riots and is self-described as "a coalition of radical and revolutionary homosexual men and women committed to fight the oppression of the homosexual as a minority group."

11. The organization exists to this day and is now the largest and longest-running FTM organization in the world.

12. In conjunction with the "Queer Bronzeville" collection, I have had students read Allen Drexel, "Before Paris Burned: Race, Class, and Male Homosexuality on the Chicago South Side, 1935-1960," in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997). "Queer Bronzeville" is an essential companion to this article; the newspaper photos, interviews, and other primary sources in the collection allow students to truly capture the era.

13. Gutterman, "Outhistory.org," 104.

14. *Ibid.*, 102.

15. For information on Omeka, see www.omeka.org. The Outhistory team is happy to answer any questions and can be reached at outhistory@gmail.com.

16. "About Outhistory," <http://outhistory.org/about-outhistory>.

