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Introduction to LGBTQ America Today

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I was born in Los Angeles in 1947 and learned from my classmates in seventh grade that boys who wrote with their left hand or wore green and yellow on Thursdays were homos. Because I did both, I knew I was in deep trouble from the start and might have some pretending to do. Such was the atmosphere for LGBTQ folks in the United States throughout the 1950s. Things loosened just a bit in the 1960s, when hippies were shaking society up. Then, in the 1970s, gay folks seemed to be a lot more visible—disturbingly so, in the minds of many—and lesbian women were suddenly a force to be reckoned with. In the 1980s, gays and lesbians were popping up all over the place: the love that dared not speak its name was shouting from the rooftops. Bisexuals gained a voice; transgendered individuals began the long struggle that is still in its infancy. “Queer” began to blur the distinctions that had defined the identity politics of these early decades.

In short, “non-heterosexual” America during these decades was as much a part of the civil rights movement as was any ethnicity. Back in 1956, set to Leonard Bernstein’s haunting tunes, Stephen Sondheim could write soulful, yearning lyrics that *West Side Story* put in the mouths of a heterosexual couple (“There’s a place for us, / Somewhere a place for us…. We’ll find a new way of living, / We’ll find a way of forgiving / Somewhere….”), but by 1990 Queer Nation was stripping away all pretense of quiet compliance, shouting “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!”

The United States had no doubt changed during these 60 years. As Kwame Anthony Appiah noted in 2006, “The increasing presence of ‘openly gay’ people in social life and in the media…changed our habits. Over the last thirty or so years, instead of thinking about the private activity of gay sex, many Americans started thinking about the public category of gay people…. Now, I don’t deny that all the time, at every stage, people were talking, giving each other reasons to do things: accept their children, stop treating homosexuality as a medical disorder, disagree with their churches, come out. Still, the short version of the story is basically this: people got used to lesbians and gay people” (Appiah 2006, 77–78).
As Noretta Koertge wrote to me in 2007, it was not just gays and lesbians whose lives were affected by these developments. “Coming to terms with LGBTQ existence,” as she said, “has had dramatic consequences for the lives of straight people: its contribution to the sexual revolution and the lives of hetero women and men, its revolutionary perspectives on sexuality, gender, anthropology, even the study of animals (lesbian sea gulls), our understanding of historical figures, liberalization of religion on other topics, a more sophisticated political understanding of civil rights. Some of these changes occurred through activism and through arts and literature, but it has also had a big impact on the academy, most of which did not come out of queer theory.”

But some of it did result from (or produce) “queer theory.” This comment from Koertge, in fact, lays bare one of the ongoing arguments among members of this “LGBTQ community” and, in the process, calls into question whether there is any such community, after all. An encyclopedia like this one must be careful lest it suggest that any one topic or individual or organization could possibly speak for such a variegated assemblage of people, decades, genders, and so on. As in the Preface, we are brought to disagreements over terms, and the politics involved in their use. Conservatives, for example, tend to cling to the phrase, “homosexual lifestyle,” as if its meaning were obvious and universal. But there is no such thing (just as there is no “black lifestyle” or, for that matter, “straight lifestyle”). Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered is simply one facet of a person’s identity, after all, with implications that cannot be foreseen. Similarly, the terms “sexual preference,” as opposed to “sexual orientation” have serious and sometimes life-threatening consequences—the former suggesting that an individual has a choice in the matter (and therefore should be straight, if he or she were not so contrary), and the latter suggesting a simple (well, not so simple) fact about oneself that is acknowledged early, late, or never. Most recently, the coded terms “friend” and “longtime companion,” for so many years the only polite way to refer to “those sorts of people,” are being overtaken with heated disputes over what to call same-sex relationships: “domestic partnerships” seemed a bridge too far for many, and now “marriage” is at the center of the bulls-eye. Each has implications: few people anymore argue that these are simply interchangeable words. Several decidedly move LGBTQ individuals closer to full acceptance as American citizens.

Nowadays, it is easily forgotten how different things looked back in 1947. Prior to 1962, for example, sodomy was a felony in every state, punishable by a lengthy term of imprisonment. Many gay men at the time grew up with the added fear of medical intervention, or of some sort of surgical intervention or forced psychiatric manipulation. At the very least, one grew up in that time with the clear message that fairies were ciphers; they would never be looked up to as role models or given the green light on the fast track to success in American society if they were self-accepting and public homosexuals. The secrecy this spawned led to the ghettoizing (or self-marginalization) of openly gay and lesbian men and women, and the ridicule or even criminalizing of those who stepped outside of accepted gender roles. There had always been, or so the dominant heterosexual culture supposed, a dangerous (perhaps seductive) underworld not only of activity among these denizens of
the demimonde, but also a sort of species difference, a sixth sense that allowed for
devious forms of communication and, some warned, insurgent un-Americanism.
Did this "gaydar" really exist, perhaps as some consolation for the isolation implicit-
ly imposed by the heteronormativity of the other 90 percent of one's countrymen
and -women?

How the social changes came about was, in many ways, simply unplanned and
serendipitous—like the Stonewall Riot on June 28, 1969, where transvestites
and others resisted police harassment in a very public and loud manner. Who
knew that this would be the clarion call to begin a rebellion among the LGBTQ
community—a revolt that, arguably, is still unfolding? Other events were planned
in detail. There was the “homophile march” on July 4, 1965, when 50 people from
the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis picketed the White House to
protest discriminatory hiring practices by the federal government. Does anyone re-
member how odd their appearance was to the general public, how easily they were
dismissed as perverts? There was the first National March on Washington for Les-
bian and Gay Rights on October 14, 1979, which drew more than 100,000 people
to mark the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots—and, at the same time, to
protest both Anita Bryant’s antigay crusade, and the lenient jail sentence given to
Dan White for the assassination of openly gay San Francisco city supervisor Harvey
Milk. Eight years later, over 500,000 would repeat that march. And in 1993, nearly
1,000,000 people would turn out for the third march on Washington on April 25,
1993. In 1982, only one state banned discrimination based on sexual orientation,
but today the issue of sexual-orientation discrimination is heavily litigated around
the country.

There were other milestones along the way, some seen to be so only in retrospec-
and not all of them worthy of celebration. The end of film industry censorship in
the late 1960s and Hollywood’s response to the AIDS epidemic in the mid 1980s
broadened the public’s understanding of LGBTQ individuals as fully human and as
familiar as their brother or sister. In 1973 homosexuality was removed from the Di-
agnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In 1976 Andy Lipincott, a char-
acter in the comic “Doonesbury,” became the first character in a major U.S. strip to
come out. The following year the U.S. State Department lifted its ban on gay and
lesbian employees. In 1978 Oklahoma passed a law allowing school districts to fire
teachers for activities judged to be an encouragement of homosexuality. The so-
called gay plague appeared in 1981 with Kaposi’s sarcoma and Pneumocystis carinii
pneumonia. Protease inhibitors arrived on the scene on December 7, 1995, ap-
proved in just 97 days by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Ellen De-
Generes’s character on the television show Ellen came out of the closet in 1997,
with a lesbian kiss seen round the world. There was the murder of Matthew Shepard
in October 1998, in Laramie, Wyoming, an emblematic reminder of the perdura-
tance of hate crimes against LGBTQ Americans. In 2002 the Boy Scouts condemned
gays as unfit examples for young men. And, as Pat Cain records in her entry in this
volume, “On June 26, 2003, the Supreme Court handed down an opinion that
clearly and explicitly overruled Bowers v. Hardwick. While Lawrence v. Texas is
perhaps the most important gay rights victory in the United States Supreme Court
to date, its effect on gay rights litigation is not yet clear. As a result of the 2003 Supreme Court decision in Lawrence v. Texas, no state has a valid sodomy statute. The San Francisco Chronicle announced on February 12, 2004 that "History was made at 11:06 a.m. today at San Francisco City Hall when Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon [Martin, 83, and the 79-year-old Lyon] took their wedding vows, becoming the first same-sex couple to be officially married in the United States." And, in other respects, not much really changed: the marriages were quickly declared invalid; one state after another reaffirmed the heterosexual nature of marriage—lest matrimony be overturned by LGBTQ contamination. In 2006 the Vatican Congregation for Education issued a document banning men of homosexual orientation from seminaries. And in July 2008 the Associated Press reported that hate crimes in Los Angeles had reached their highest levels in five years ("Hate Crimes Against Gays Rise in LA," 2008).

Particular people caught the public's attention along the way. In its 40th anniversary issue (September 25, 2007) celebrating the top 40 LGBTQ heroes of the last 40 years, The Advocate ranked them as follows: Ellen DeGeneres first, then Barney Frank, Harvey Milk, Matthew Shepard, Melissa Etheridge, Billie Jean King, Harvey Fierstein, Elton John, Margaret the Camermeyer, Rosie O'Donnell, Martina Navratilova, Tony Perry, Greg Louganis, Mel White, V. Gene Robinson, Ian McKellen, Betty Berzon, Larry Kramer, k. d. lang, Rita Mae Brown, Mark Bingham, Armistead Maupin, Harry Hay, Tammy Baldwin, Tony Kushner, Pedro Zamora, Malcolm Boyd, Cleve Jones, John Waters, Indigo Girls, Randy Shilts, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, Elizabeth Birch, Bayard Rustin, Audre Lorde, Leonard Matlovich, Tim Gill, John Amaechi, Roberta Achtenberg, and Barbara Gittings. One of the criteria was that the individual had to be entirely "out." There are many things that could be said about who is on this list, and who has been overlooked (for example, the thousands upon thousands of common folks who decided, over these 40 years, to stop "pretending"). The list is indicative of the hunger for notoriety that characterizes the United States of the last 60 years, but the layout of the magazine is also fascinating and offers a silent record of where the LGBTQ community has come in that time: interspersed among the 23 pages of the article are the following advertisements, and in this order: one page from Ameriprise Financial on retirement planning, one from Subaru, one from the Hilton hotel chain encouraging readers to "come as you are: fabulous," one from IBM showing a female sheriff, one for Bridgestone tires, one for Melissa Etheridge’s latest album, one from Travelocity suggesting that "it shouldn’t take highly developed gaydar to figure out which hotels are for you," and four consecutive pages from Aptivus, described as a "protease inhibitor for highly treatment-experienced patients who have taken anti-HIV medicines in the past or who have virus that shows resistance to two or more PIs" (49-71).

Obviously, a lot has happened in the last 60 years, and this encyclopedia offers a record of some of that. By definition, it must be a partial record, overlooking many important individuals who advanced the rights of LGBTQ individuals, who helped redefine this group of Americans that has run out of patience with the definitions that others had historically imposed upon them. It is a record of growing maturity,
of anguish, and—let’s not forget—erotic celebration. In the arts, in the courts, in the churches, in the PTA—and in the YMCA—we’re here. And proud to be.

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References