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Vicki Eaklor's *Queer America: A People's History of the United States* (book review)

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***Queer America: A People's GLBT History of the United States.* By Vicki L. Eaklor (New York: The New Press, 2011. xxx plus 274 pp. \$17.98)**

Vicki Eaklor's *Queer America* was originally published in 2008 by the Greenwood Press.¹ Three years later this excellent survey of twentieth-century gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender ("GLBT") history was reissued as "a New Press People's History" in a series edited by the late Howard Zinn (d. 2010). The series name pays tribute to Zinn's frankly revisionist *A People's History of the United States*, which has sold more than two million copies since 1980. Other books in the series treat topics examined at length in Zinn's controversial bestseller: poverty; the American and Mexican Revolutions; the Civil and Vietnam Wars.² *Queer America*, by contrast, covers ground that Zinn left untouched in the first edition of *A People's History* and only fleetingly mentioned in the book's last edition, published in 2010. There, in an Afterword, Zinn acknowledged his persistent neglect of queer history and proffered an excuse belied by his work's ample attention to indigenous peoples, African-Americans, and women: "I suppose ... it was my own sexual orientation that accounted for my minimal treatment of the issue of gay and lesbian rights." Readers of Zinn's opus would have to look elsewhere for a "substantial account of the remarkable change in the national culture that took place when men and women who were 'queer' ... asserted their humanity boldly, courageously, to the larger society."³

Queer America offers just the sort of account that Zinn imagined but failed to furnish himself. It not only tells us but shows us that, contrary to the impression left by *A People's History of the United States*, "GLBT history is U.S. history" (xii).

Unlike most other volumes in the People's History series, *Queer America* is the work of an academic historian, in this case one who has taught LGBTQ history for over twenty years.⁴ *Queer America* grows out of this prodigious practical experience, offering students and teachers in the field a badly needed resource—a textbook, a nearly "comprehensive survey of 20th-century American history aimed at the general reader" (3). *Queer America* can be characterized—and might well be used—as a narrative complement to *Gay American History* (1976), Jonathan Ned Katz's groundbreaking and still highly serviceable compilation of primary materials dating from the colonial period onward.

The pairing Eaklor's textbook with Katz's sourcebook would be stronger, of course, if *Queer America* provided detailed coverage beyond the twentieth century. According to Eaklor, limiting *Queer America* to the past century "conveniently allow[ed] it to bypass" some thorny problems of categorization, problems that Eaklor skillfully introduces in the book's first chapter ("What is GLGBT History?") through a discussion

of Abraham Lincoln's homosocial and possibly homoerotic intimacies. Unfortunately, her expedient temporal limitation too strongly implies that inquiry into twentieth-century people and phenomena proceeds unfettered by the definitional difficulties that beset historians of earlier periods. A twentieth-century focus also undermines the book's utility for the kind of survey course on "Gay American History" that Eaklor herself teaches. An early chapter's fascinating if desultory review of pre-1900 phenomena, from the *berdache* of certain Native American cultures to the sexologists of the *fin-de-siècle*, practically invites a reader to want and expect more.

Yet when it comes to the story the book actually sets out to tell—"the story of GLBT people and the conditions in which they lived during the last century" (xi)—*Queer America* is thorough, engaging, and insightful. Eaklor proceeds chronologically through well-paced and well-researched chapters on "Sexualities and Communities through Two World Wars," "Queers in Cold War America," "Cultures and Politics after Stonewall," "Backlash and Regrouping" (about the 1980s), "The GLBT Nineties," and finally the "controversy, visibility, and diversity" that characterize the contemporary moment. Each chapter begins with revealing vignettes of notable individuals, such as trumpeter Ernestine "Tiny" Davis and activists Frank Kameny, Steve Endean, and Silvia Rivera. Sophisticated but accessible sidebars address historical and historiographical questions that complicate Eaklor's essentially descriptive account: What did the Kinsey studies prove? How important was the Stonewall Riot? How useful is queer theory? Eaklor treats these issues with the same erudition and even-handedness that characterize the book as a whole and distinguish it from the more polemical efforts of Zinn and other authors in the People's History series.

Comparison to Zinn's *People's History* highlights another of *Queer America's* virtues, and at the same time one respect in which the book might be improved in future editions. Among the most important and inspiring aspects of Zinn's work, and of the scholarship in social and cultural history on which Zinn relied, was sustained concern for "the lives and activities of ordinary people trying to make a better world, or just trying to survive."⁵ Early in *Queer America*, Eaklor avows a similar intention. Quoting poet Judy Grahn, she promises to write of "people simply living their lives 'the best they knew how'" (4). Accordingly, in addition to the volume's detailed account of GLBT political and social history—the development of networks, undergrounds, institutions, and movements—*Queer America* offers brief but precious insights into the private experiences and personal subjectivities of ordinary queer people. Discussions of works like Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* and Martin Duberman's *Cures*, for example, powerfully suggest how many subjects of queer history never made it even into the shadows of the pre-Stonewall gay bar. Chapters on the post-Stonewall period, however, elide the continued prevalence of the closet, of GLBT suicide, and of class- and race-based exclusions from GLBT community and disidentifications with GLBT identity. *Queer America*, admirably dedicated "to all the GLBT people who are in this book and to all those who are not," can and should weave such somber threads into the general narrative of progress it otherwise tells so well.

Michael Boucai

¹ Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: A GLBT History of the 20th Century* (2008).

² See Stephen Pimpare, *A People's History of Poverty in America* (2008); Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (2002); Adolfo Gilly, *A People's History of the Mexican Revolution* (2006); David Williams & Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the Civil War: Struggles for the Meaning of Freedom* (2005); Jonathan Neale, *A People's History of the Vietnam War* (2004).

³ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (2010), p. 687.

⁴ Vicki L. Eaklor, "Teaching LGBTQ History: Two Situations," *Perspectives on History* (May 2010), available at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1005/1005for5.cfm>.

⁵ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (1980), p. 583.