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5 Questions with Dr. Lauren Gutterman

by American Studies

The

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Department of American Studies is very pleased to announce that Dr. Lauren Gutterman will be joining our faculty in the fall of 2015. Dr. Gutterman comes to us from the University of Michigan, where she is a Postdoctoral Scholar in the Society of Fellows. She holds a PhD in History from New York University, and has published in Gender & History and The Journal of Social History. Her current book manuscript, developed out of her dissertation, focuses on lived experiences of mid-20th century married women who desired other women. We spoke with Dr. Gutterman earlier this month, in advance of her arrival in Austin this August.

UT AMS: What is your scholarly background and how does it motivate your teaching and research?

Dr. Gutterman: I received my PhD in History at New York University, and I'm currently a postdoctoral scholar in Women's Studies and the Society of Fellows



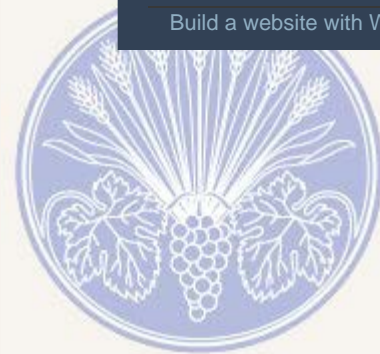
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at the University of Michigan. But my academic career really began as an undergraduate at Northwestern University where I double majored in American Studies and Gender Studies. Part of me will always be chasing the feelings I experienced as an undergrad as I learned to look at things—especially with regard to gender and sexuality—in an entirely new way. It just felt like the world was opening up, changing before my eyes, all these things that sound so trite but were completely true. As an undergrad I also discovered my love of history. I wrote a senior thesis about the New England Watch and Ward Society’s anti-burlesque campaign in the 1930s and that was my first experience with archival research. It was so exciting for me to read and touch things written so long ago, to try to see the world through someone else’s eyes. I discovered the depth of my nerdiness.

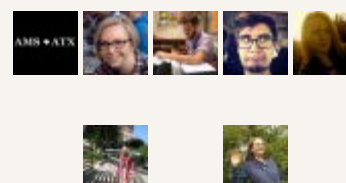
As a teacher and a researcher, I’m most passionate about understanding how what we think of as normal and natural in terms of gender and sexuality has changed over time. My classes (like my research) combine a study of politics and popular culture in American history. In the fall I’ll be offering a course called “Sexuality, Reproduction, and American Social Movements,” which I’ve taught twice before at the University of Michigan. One of the things I enjoy most about this course is challenging students’ belief that women’s reproductive rights keep improving steadily with time. So, for example, we read about

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how abortion was unstigmatized, legal, and often easily accessible for most of the 19th century. There's an oral history interview I use on [History Matters](#) with a working-class immigrant woman who got twelve abortions at the turn of the twentieth century in New York City safely, and without thinking anything of it; this is completely shocking for students.

In addition, one of my major goals as a scholar has been to try to speak to a broad audience, to engage those beyond the academic world in the history of sexuality. I've tried to do this in multiple ways, through my work with the history of sexuality websites [OutHistory.org](#) and [Notches](#), the [Pop-Up Museum of Queer History](#), and the [Center for LGBTQ Studies](#) at the Graduate Center, CUNY. One of my proudest moments was discovering that artist [Elvis Bakaitis](#) had cited my work in a zine about 1950s queer history.

What projects or people have inspired your work?

Like many historians of homosexuality, George Chauncey's *Gay New York* is probably the one book that has had the greatest impact on my work. I first read it as an undergraduate and I remember being awed both by the extent and details of the queer world he uncovered, and by the simple fact that it was possible to do this kind of history.

My current project, which examines the

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lives of wives who desired women since the postwar period, is in some ways a response to Chauncey's book which focuses primarily on men and on the public sphere. I don't believe that lesbians have ever had the same claims to public space that gay or queer men have had (even today there are far fewer lesbian bars), but this has not prevented women from engaging in sexual relationships with each other. My book project argues, in part, that the nuclear family household has functioned as a lesbian or queer space for married women; the women in my study typically engaged in same-sex affairs with other wives and mothers they met in the course of their daily lives, within their own homes.

What was your favorite project to work on and why?

I'm still working on revising my first book manuscript *Her Neighbor's Wife: A History of Lesbian Desire within Marriage*, which is based on my dissertation, so it is hard to talk about having a "favorite" project, since I don't have many to choose from!

I can, however, speak to a favorite moment in researching this project, which occurred when I first went to the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco to look at the papers of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon. Martin and Lyon were long-time lesbian activists who helped found the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the nation's first lesbian rights group in 1955. When I first set out on

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this project, I imagined that I would focus on the lives of three women, one of whom was Del Martin. When I got to the GLBT Historical Society the materials I'd hoped would be there—about her personal life while she was married—were not, but I did discover dozens and dozens of letters that married women had written to the DOB and to Martin and Lyon stretching from the 1950s to the 1980s. Discovering those letters changed the entire frame of my project, because I realized I could write a social history (rather than a group biography) about these women, which I had not imagined before. I joked at the time it was like a finding a dissertation in a box.

How do you see your work fitting in with broader conversations in academia and beyond?

Well, I'll start with academia because that's easier...One of the things I am trying to do as a scholar is to draw attention to the ways that the history of homosexuality is primarily based on men's experiences. This problem cannot be addressed simply by taking our current model of gay history and "adding" women. I believe that focusing on women's lives can change our understanding of the history of homosexuality as a whole. For example (as I alluded to above), as long as the history of homosexuality focuses on the public sphere—on bars and public sex, and even government policing—women will inevitably play a lesser role within it. To

make women more central to the history of homosexuality requires that we pay much more attention to the domestic sphere, as I do in my book. But this is just one of the ways that I think gay history might change by centering women's lives.

Beyond the academic world, my work obviously relates to the broader conversation about gay marriage. My work shows that legally defining marriage as "between one man and one woman" cannot, and has not, ensured marriage's straightness. Even in the postwar period—when American marriages were more widespread and longer-lasting than ever before—wives who desired women found myriad ways to balance marriage with lesbian affairs. Often these women did so by engaging in same-sex affairs in secret, but many women did not hide their affairs from their husbands entirely, and many husbands were willing to turn a blind eye to their wives' special friendships, and just wait for them to pass. In this way, my work shows that the histories of marriage and of homosexuality have long been intertwined, and that, in a way, marriage has been queer for much longer than we'd like to think.

What projects are you excited about working on in the future?

Over the last year or so, with the help of two incredible undergraduate research assistants at the University of Michigan, I've begun researching and writing about the case of Jeannace June Freeman, the

first woman sentenced to death in Oregon in 1961. Freeman was a white, working-class, butch lesbian and she and her lover, Gertrude Nunez Jackson, together murdered Jackson's two young children in an incredibly brutal way. Based on everything we know about stereotypes about violent, mannish lesbians from the work of Lisa Duggan among other scholars, and about the discrimination homosexuals faced in the middle of the twentieth century, the fact that Freeman was sentenced to death is not at all surprising. What is surprising, however, (and this is what has fascinated me about this very disturbing case), is that Freeman became the major symbol of the movement to abolish capital punishment in Oregon, and many Oregonians came to see her as sympathetic. Ultimately, in large part because of her case, voters repealed the death penalty in Oregon in 1964 by referendum, and the governor commuted Freeman's sentence to life in prison. So the question that has been guiding this project is, why and how did Oregonians come to see a butch, lesbian, child-killer as deserving of mercy?

At the meta level, though, this project is also about resisting the pressures that historians of homosexuality face to do history that is always somehow "good" for LGBT politics. Obviously, the field of sexuality history is fundamentally linked to the emergence of the gay liberation and women's liberation movements of the 1970s. And my own commitment to

researching and writing the history of homosexuality is shaped by my political concerns, my desire to show that this history matters. But at the same time, I don't think it is good or honest to neglect those parts of the gay past we'd prefer to keep hidden. Jeannace June Freeman's case certainly lent credence to the worst stereotypes about lesbians at midcentury, but when we ignore her story—or those of other “bad queers”—we lose opportunities for historical insight and we surrender our ability as scholars to help contextualize some of the ugliest parts of the queer past. I don't think we can overcome homophobic stereotypes by tiptoeing around them.

Bonus question – in one sentence, what is American Studies to you?

To me, American Studies is the study of what it means and what it has meant to be American. Who gets to choose? Who gets excluded? What cultural and political mechanisms enable those exclusions? And how have they changed over time? In addition, for me American Studies is as much about the research method as the object; it's about a commitment to interdisciplinary work, however complicated or difficult that may be.

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