

Review: Michael Bronski, adapted by Richie Chevat, *A Queer History of the United States for Young People*

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Michael Bronski, adapted by Richie Chevat, *A Queer History of the United States for Young People*. Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2019. Pp. 336. \$18.95

In Michael Bronski's 2019 book, *A Queer History of the United States for Young People*, the author offers a deeply humanizing, robust, and accessible account of LGBTQ+ history through biographical profiles of queer and transgender*¹ people. In my experience as a teacher of social studies and special education with expertise in queer theory (who is also queer and Disabled), this book offers something special for young people that I do not often see: content that gives teachers a chance to develop curriculum that grounds students' identities in connection with everyday queer and transgender* people from the past. In a political moment full of newly passed anti-queer legislation, it is comforting to have a queer history that is joyful and affirmational.

Bronski starts with an excellent disclaimer about needing to frame queerness as the disruption of "normal" ideas about gender and sexuality (1) and writes a heartening and informative discussion about pronoun usage (9). The level of care Bronski offers is also evident in the book's glossary, which includes student-centered definitions of LGBTQ+ terminology and key vocabulary. Taken together, Bronski has provided teachers with a solid toolkit for teaching queer history. Throughout the book, Bronski is measured and careful about not employing a lens of queer presentism (projecting modern conceptions about LGBTQ+ identity onto the past). The book offers a counter-narrative to a common trope often seen in LGBTQ+ history and U.S. history (when LGBTQ+ people are included at all): that queer/trans* historical figures overcame some huge struggle in spite of – or maybe because of – their queerness to go on to do some monumental thing. Macro-level historical stories, like Stonewall (xii-xx, 259), have value but emphasizing the successes and struggles of everyday non-activist LGBTQ+ folks, as Bronski does, is also important. For many LGBTQ+ people, living authentically as your truest self has been and continues to be challenging because of cultural norms and social pressures. However, Bronski's book offers tangible examples of how everyday LGBTQ+ people from the past lived as their authentic selves and often in community with one another. In a time when many LGBTQ+ youth do not grow up immersed in their culture, turning towards LGBTQ+ historical figures as an example of how to be themselves is powerful – just as powerful as learning about pivotal movements like Stonewall. We see, for instance, love letters between Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown, two Black queer women writing to each other in 1859 (83-87). We learn about the stories behind selecting clothes LGBTQ+ folks felt would express their authentic selves, as seen in Gladys Bentley, a renowned Black queer Blues performer (119-128).

Bronski's book captures the historical breadcrumbs that queer and trans* elders left us about their lives, and which offers hope and optimism for a younger generation. It grounds us in their neighborhoods, for instance, pointing to how in 1920s and 1930s many leaders in Harlem were queer and their community welcomed them with open arms (126-128). For queer and trans* readers – youthful and older – the book gives historical insight

¹ I draw upon the work of Dr. Jack Halberstam, scholar of queer theory, gender studies and cultural studies, in my spelling and definition of "transgender*" here to denote the umbrella usage of the term enveloping anyone who does not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth and encompassing the identities of gender-expansive and non-binary people. See Halberstam's work, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*.

to deeply personal experiences that are often misunderstood, in the past and the present. Bronski, for instance, emphasizes the experiences of trans* people who medically transitioned with gender affirming care as well as trans* people who only socially transitioned. Take the remarkable life of Alfred D. J. Cashier, a transgender man born in 1843 and who was a Union hero of the Civil War. Bronski writes that Cashier lived peacefully as a transgender man for fifty years after a successful career as a soldier. When Cashier was outed in 1915, many of the veterans he fought with chose to stand by and accept him for who he was. Queer and trans* students (and most folks) know that outing someone is a violent act that is done against a person's will, and they will likely find the story of Cashier, a trans* elder living in the early twentieth century, and the group of friends who stood by him after he was outed heartening because of the display of allyship (62-67). We also learn about groundbreaking figures whose stories have been historically overlooked, like Bayard Rustin, a Black gay man who worked as a close collaborator with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the details that humanize and make them relatable to students. Readers learn, for example, that Rustin had a large family that loved him dearly, how Rustin published poetry in high school, and the sports he played – track and football (164-171). Bronski writes about LGBTQ+ people from the past, famous and not so famous, in a way that makes the reader feel a sense of strong familiarity because of the details about their lives that are included; these people could be their neighbors, their coworkers, or their friends.

There are moments in the text that teachers will need to further contextualize for young readers. For instance, some historical terms, although accurate, will not land well in the present due to evolved cultural meanings. Though Bronski included an important discussion early in the book on usage of terms, especially the need to use the ones LGBTQ+ people used themselves, there are some instances in which teachers will need to have complementary discussions with students about language. One passage that illustrates this is the story of Julian Eltinge, who Bronski identifies as a “The Most Famous Cross-Dresser in America” (106). Bronski introduces Eltinge by saying that “The exact details of the early years of William Julian Dalton are foggy... All of this confusion, or mystery, is fitting because in his later life William Julian Dalton spent a lot of time confusing people. At a very early age, Bill – who eventually took the stage name Julian Eltinge – was an extraordinary and very talented female impersonator. That is, he performed on stage dressed in female characters. By the 1920s, he was internationally famous and critically praised on the stage and in films as a man who played female characters” (106). While I believe Bronski's intent was to be approachable and conversational, describing Eltinge as “confusing people” falls short. It implies that playing with gender performance is confusing and reinforces the idea that normative gender performance is “correct.” Also, the term “cross-dressing” is generally not used now in the LGBTQ+ community because it is widely considered offensive and generally has not been reclaimed in the same way as terms like “queer.” Language, in other words, continues to evolve in important ways for the community. Teachers can supplement Bronski's passage on Eltinge, which includes helpful pictures and the history of playing with gender performance in performance spaces (107-109), with modern teachings from drag pedagogy to explain how LGBTQ+ people and many other people play with gender presentation all the time. This passage also could have been helped by a reminder to the reader of why Bronski chose to use this term and guidance on how to approach this conversation with students about historical vocabulary and playing with gender performance.

Another place for growth is in the way Bronski writes about disability, a topic on which the Non-Disabled public is not well-informed, and especially as it pertains to the personal narratives of Disabled people from the past. Bronski, for instance, writes that Jane Addams, queer herself and a founding member of the social work field, saw herself as othered because of her disability but offered no further context. This conjecture was disappointing to read because it offered little evidence to support the claim and left the reader – especially someone like me, who is a Disabled writer and academic researcher – with a lot of questions, as it upheld a deficit view of disability (98). Teachers could remedy this shortcoming by reading about how Disabled people counter deficit ideas about disability. Alice Wong's work, a celebrated disability activist who writes for public audiences, is an excellent primer on the topic.

Overall, I would recommend Bronski's book because it does the important and much-needed work of documenting the legacy of everyday queer and transgender* excellence. The profiles themselves, coupled with

Bronski's expertise in teaching queer history at the college level, offers clear and insightful accounts of LGBTQ+ perspectives in an exciting way. As such, Bronski's book is a welcome publication for social studies teachers hoping to add LGBTQ+ stories to their U.S. history curriculum.