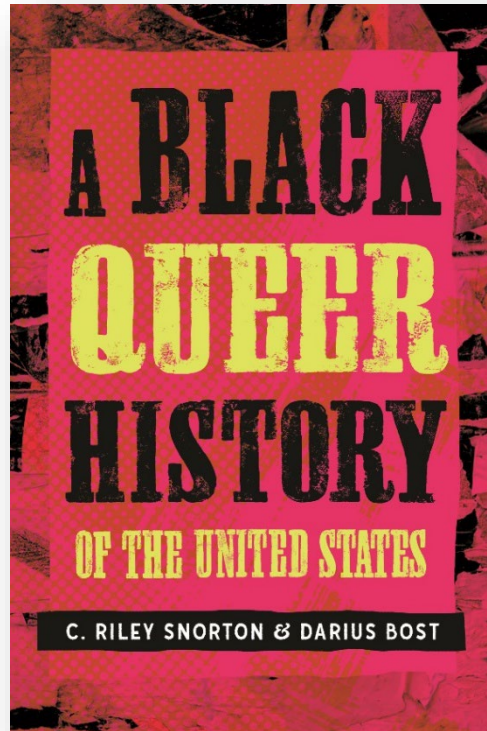


A Black Queer History of the United States
by C. Riley Snorton and Darius Bost

Readers' Guide Discussion Questions



General Questions

1. At the heart of this book is the assumption that race, gender, and sexuality intersect, impacting Black queer and trans people's lived experiences and how they are perceived by society. What are some examples of intersectionality in the book? Why is it critical to think about racial, gender, and sexuality as intersecting rather than as distinct categories of social difference and identity?
2. Why do you think other African Americans have viewed Black queer and trans people as not subject to racial oppression? Can you think of examples of this?
3. The authors seek to challenge the assumption that Blackness was and is cis and straight. Cis and straight identities are often attributed to individuals rather than communities. Why do the authors associate these terms with the broader Black community?
4. The authors choose to focus on Black queer people's central roles in the modern Black freedom movement. What are the benefits and limitations of this approach? What other methods might you take to tell this history?

5. Who is your favorite Black queer or trans historical figure in the book and why?
6. The authors argue that the marginalization of Black queer people with AIDS, after its appearance in the 1980s, is the “culmination of neglect of the needs and desires of LGBTQ people throughout the modern Black freedom movement” (4). Based on your reading, do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?
7. What lessons does this history teach us that might be helpful in the current moment? How might learning about the Black queer past help activists and everyday citizens navigate today’s hostile political climate?
8. The authors set out to expand the meanings of Blackness from its past associations with racial and sexual domination to tell a story of Black history that centers queer and trans people. What do they mean by this? Why is it necessary to expand the historical meanings of Blackness as a “denigrated caste” to write a Black queer history?
9. The authors express reservations about how this book will be used: as a tool of empowerment or evidence of social progress rather than as a tool for teaching transgression. Why do you think they have these concerns? How would you use this book as a tool for teaching transgression?

Chapter One

1. Sexual identity categories in the United States are inextricably tied to histories of slavery and colonialism. How does this history shape our understandings of Black and queer identities today?
2. The authors discuss the absence of historical evidence of consensual same-sex desire and relationships and of gender nonconformity in the antebellum period. Since historians rely upon documented evidence to make claims about the past, using creative fiction as evidence of queerness in this period does not meet these standards. Why do you think the authors chose to use Black gay and lesbian fiction despite its lack of evidentiary authority?
3. We have often heard about white male slaveholders' abuse of enslaved Black women. We have not often heard about the abuse of enslaved Black women by female enslavers and enslaved Black men by male enslavers. Why do you think these stories have been silenced? How does including these stories shift our understanding of Black and queer history?

Chapter Two

1. The authors focus on the use of pseudonyms to acknowledge the expansive ways that gender-nonconforming and queer Black people negotiate dominant meanings of race, gender, and sexuality. What are some examples of this?
2. The authors address how modern categories of gender and sexuality do not apply to nineteenth-century figures like William Cathay/Cathay Williams and Ellen Craft. What strategies

do they use to include these figures in Black queer history without imposing these categories on them?

3. The authors suggest that the impulse to name and categorize identities reflects broader cultural anxieties about the meanings of race, gender, and sexuality. What do they mean by this?

Chapter Three

1. Should we continue to claim James Baldwin as a gay hero if he did not identify as gay?

2. We usually think of social progress as linear—that society has become more accepting of gender and sexual minorities over time. However, white trans advocate Christine Jorgensen’s story was positively received by society in the 1950s, while trans people face extreme opposition today. Why do you think certain sects of society could accept gender as mutable seventy years ago and not today?

3. Can you think of times when you have chosen to be open about your identity (not just LGBTQ) and other times when you have chosen not to be? Do you think choosing not to be open about one’s identity in certain moments is regressive (i.e., stuck in the closet)?

Chapter Four

1. Were you aware that house music had its origins in Black gay clubs? Does that knowledge change your perception of its meteoric rise to the mainstream of popular culture?

2. The authors state that their historical analysis of Black queer and trans musicians is not merely about including them in Black music history but is also about showing how queerness and transness are intrinsic to Black sound. What distinction are they trying to make?

3. The authors describe rap and disco, though culturally marked as heterosexual and queer respectively, as twin musical genres that work in tandem to offer an alternative view of Black life in the 1970s and 1980s. What do they mean by this? How does this analysis further their claims about the significance of Black queer musicians’ contributions to American culture and politics?

Chapter Five

1. Why do you think there is a lack of information about Black people’s patronage and involvement in protests at bars and restaurants in the 1960s? How might this knowledge challenge the dominant account of the modern LGBT movement?

2. Why do you think Black queer and trans people have sought out spaces for worship within faith traditions that have historically marginalized and rejected them?

3. Liberal policymakers and social scientists in the mid-twentieth century viewed African Americans as having internal conflicts over sexuality and increased instances of gender variance because of the racial oppression they had faced since slavery. How does this influential view

about the origins of Black gender and sexual difference challenge mainstream historical accounts of LGBTQ identity in American society?

Chapter Six

1. Do you believe mainstream gay activists' focus on gay marriage and hate crimes is shortsighted? If so, what kind of political platform would mainstream gay activists have to take up if they wanted to include the voices and experiences of Black queer people fully?
2. Why do you think Black queer women chose to attend and stay at the Million Woman March, given the hostility they faced by other participants and some of the organizers, as well as the marginalization of Black lesbian issues? Have you experienced this feeling of marginal acceptance before?
3. Journalist Jasmyne Cannick attributed African Americans' overwhelming support of Proposition 8 to the advocacy work of the Protect Marriage alliance. Do you believe that gay advocacy in Black communities could have changed the outcome of the ballot initiative? What might these advocates say to Black communities to gain support?

Conclusion

1. The authors assert that Black queer people have been squeezed between Black and queer social movements and their efforts to center Black queer and trans voices as a challenge to dual forms of marginalization. What are some of examples from the book that exemplify how Black queer and trans people have been squeezed between mainstream movements?
2. Using the example of Cheryl Dunye's invention of a Black queer historical figure in her film *The Watermelon Woman*, the authors state that writing a book about the Black queer history of the United States would not have been possible three decades ago. What societal changes have made writing *A Black Queer History of the United States* possible?
3. In their reading of Dunye's film *Black Is Blue*, the authors view the character Black's encounter with a painful past as a metaphor for their efforts to write a Black queer history of the United States. What do they mean by this?