



Queer America

Summer 2026

I am excited to begin exploring the rich - and surprising - histories of gender and sexuality in America. Together we will examine the histories of lesbians, gay men, trans people, and other socially-constituted sexual and gender minorities in America from the fifteenth century to the present. To understand the creation and regulation of these subversive categories, we will learn about the emergence and boundaries of normative sexuality, particularly heterosexuality. Likely topics we will explore include the cultivation of queer subcultures and their representation in popular culture; the roots of antigay hostility; and gay, feminist, and queer liberation.

To prepare for the start of the course, please read *Forest Euphoria: The Abounding Queerness of Nature* by the mycologist (i.e. a scholar of fungi) Patricia Ononiwu Kaishian. Part memoir, part historical study, part science lesson, part call to action, *Forest Euphoria* was celebrated as one of the best books of 2025 by sources like *Vanity Fair*, which wrote:

We're told from a young age that "natural" hierarchies govern the world. This structure, some say, is how humans distinguish between good and bad, lesser and greater. Yet hierarchies have been the basis of cruelty for generations – systems designed to oppress those deemed "abnormal" or anyone who fails to achieve the desired rank. We're taught not to question these systems, to never wonder why beauty and goodness are conflated, or why creatures deemed more "human," "pure," or aligned with white-centric European ideals are typically held in higher esteem than anyone else. But in *Forest Euphoria: The Abounding Queerness of Nature*, Patricia Ononiwu Kaishian urges us to reconsider this "natural" order.

As you read *Forest Euphoria*, please annotate carefully by considering:

1. Wait...what does this book have to do with queer history??
2. Kaishian describes the idea that the human world and the natural world are separate as "a wedge plunged into an imaginary crevice." In what ways are they the same? Why do you think humans try to see them as different?
3. *Forest Euphoria* presents lots of information about many different organisms: eels, slugs, fungi. What did you find most surprising? Troubling? Comforting?
4. What does it mean for a person, place, idea, or behavior to be "natural?" What does it mean to be "queer?"

Enjoy your summer vacation, stay safe, and reach out if you have any questions.

-Dr. Whitehead