

Scholar tracks the changing world of gay sexuality

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With same-sex marriage now legalized in 19 states and laws making it impossible to ban homosexuals from serving in the military, gay, lesbian and bisexual people are now enjoying more freedoms and rights than ever before.

As the creator of the freshman seminar *Gay Autobiography*, which he has taught at Stanford since 2000, historian Paul Robinson has had a uniquely informed view of the evolving world of [gay](#) culture.

Robinson's work as a scholar, gay man and teacher has given him front-row seats to what he calls "the ongoing erosion of the closet."

"Keeping being gay a secret has been a particularly American way of dealing with homosexuality, but there's a growing sense that you can't live a lie," observed Robinson, the Richard W. Lyman Professor in the Humanities, Emeritus.

Robinson attributes the transformation of attitudes by and toward gays to the AIDS epidemic.

"Gay men and lesbians became an object of admiration for the way they dealt with the crisis. They created a community around it and earned a lot of sympathy as a result," he said.

A specialist in European intellectual history, Robinson has developed an international reputation for his writings on Freud and the history of

music. Since the beginning of his career back in the 1960s, however, a consistent theme undergirding his work has been what we think about sex. "It's as clearly part of our intellectual history as the history of political, economic or social thought," he said.

With the publishing of his well-regarded 1999 book *Gay Lives: Homosexual Autobiography* from John Addington Symonds to Paul Monette, Robinson more pointedly turned his attention to gay male history.

"In the past 15 years, homosexuality has become the direct and full-time subject of my writing, as opposed to the implicit and often glancing subject it was in my earlier books," Robinson said.

Robinson followed up *Gay Lives* with a book on gay conservatives, *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics* (2005).

"Paul's work has always been very broadly based," noted his colleague Peter Stansky, the Frances and Charles Field Professor of History, Emeritus. "He's now integrating his life with his work to a much greater degree. He continues to make an important intellectual contribution as he turns to a topic that is very timely."

It's a world Robinson has known firsthand. His own life has been a journey fraught with the agony and ecstasy of being gay, including attempts to "convert" himself through religion and marriage, coming out publicly to friends and family in 1967 and remaining closeted to his Stanford colleagues until 1982.

In the culture at large as well as in his classroom, Robinson has witnessed a number of shifts in attitudes, beliefs and practices within and regarding gay culture. "Since the 1970s, people have been increasingly coming out publicly – even in the baseball or football world, for example. Now you

have many more personal stories being written," he said.

He has also observed a trend toward "gay assimilationism."

"You see [gay men](#) getting married, settling down and having a family," he said. "Many gay male students assume they will be fathers. That's a radically different situation from 20 to 30 years ago, when gay men had pets, but not children."

For the Stanford historian, who came of age just prior to the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City, which spurred the gay liberation movement, the cultural shift has been pleasantly rapid. "It's all happened very suddenly. I thought it would take longer," he said.

'Homophobia is in trouble'

Robinson's Stanford seminar emerged from Gay Lives, a study of sexual memoirs written by 14 gay artists and intellectuals over the past 100 years.

When Robinson first started teaching the 17-seat seminar, only eight of the 40 applicants were gay men; the rest were heterosexual women, and nearly all were European American. Today, the applicant pool mostly comprises students of color, including a smattering of women who identify as lesbians. Half of the students now drawn to the course are men, and while most are gay, among them a growing number are straight. Some years he must teach twice a day, in the afternoon and evening, to accommodate the number of interested students.

"It's no longer embarrassing for young straight men at Stanford to go back to their dorms and say they're taking the course," said Robinson, who has won numerous teaching awards since arriving at Stanford in 1967. "I take this as evidence that homophobia is in trouble, perhaps

fatally so."

Moreover, Gay Autobiography now attracts transsexual individuals. "The topic of transgenderism comes up frequently in class discussion, and it's an issue that's being addressed by people at younger and younger ages," said Robinson.

He added that more and more students are identifying as "non-binary," refusing to conform to either male or female categorizations. Some students even consider themselves to be "asexual"; while they are interested in romantic relations, they don't want to have sexual relations.

While Robinson has flirted with the idea of including lesbian literature in the course, he has chosen to keep the theme on the lives of gay men. "I've been inhibited by my sense of the inappropriateness of a man's pronouncing on the lives of women, particularly women sexually attracted to other women," he said.

In parallel with the changing needs and perspectives of his students, Robinson has shifted his syllabus away from an initial focus on the texts he drew on for his book *Gay Lives – British, French and American autobiographies by gay men reaching back to the 19th century*.

Now, he concentrates on what grabs students the most – American autobiographies, with which they can better identify, and he includes one volume on transgender identity. He has students study films, as well.

"The culture has become much more visual, and gay themes are being engaged in film to an ever greater degree," he explained. Movies such as *Angels in America* and *Brokeback Mountain*, as well as television episodes of the Showtime series *Queer as Folk*, are all screened during the course.

"The old categories – male-female, straight-gay – are not as firm as they used to be," he said, reflecting on his up-close view of students' sexual attitudes through classroom sharing as well as the autobiographical essays they are assigned to write in the course.

"There's a sense that virtually everybody is in play," Robinson noted. "Fraternity men may have a gay experience but it doesn't commit them to being gay. If they are gay, they are open to the possibility that they might fall in love with a straight person, and the relationship might work out. People no longer have to decide whether they are straight or gay."

Provided by Stanford University

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