**Review of Emily Hobson’s Lavender and Red**

This is part of an ongoing series of reviews written by Temple graduate students of new books considering the study of force, diplomacy, and international history. These reviews will be posted on an ongoing basis throughout the year. The books you’ll see reviewed here are brand new — they often haven’t made it into the pages of major scholarly journals yet, allowing our reviewers to get their say in before the dust has settled. If you would like to participate as a reviewer, or have a book to suggest, please contact Brian McNamara, CENFAD’s Thomas J. Davis Fellow, at brian.mcnamara@temple.edu.

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Emily K. Hobson’s 2016 book *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* offers a new perspective on the U.S. Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement of the post-Stonewall period. Rather than rehashing the common narrative of a grassroots Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement that eventually integrated into electoral and diplomatic politics and worked toward military inclusion and marriage equality, Hobson reveals the stories of queers in the San Francisco Bay Area who viewed the heterosexual oppression imposed upon them as simultaneously furthering racism, militarism, and capitalism on a global scale. While other historians have viewed anti-capitalist politics as an element of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement, which existed on the fringe, and which died out in the early 1970s, Hobson’s work presents this strain of politics as a continuous and integral aspect of Gay Liberation from Stonewall to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

These Gay and Lesbian leftists viewed anti-racist and anti-militarist movements as connected with gay rights and supported these other political struggles on those terms. Ultimately, these activists saw true sexual liberation as impossible in a larger society that perpetuated racism and militarism in the form of anticommunist Cold War foreign policies. Hobson’s analysis shows how activists’ intersectional approach to gay liberation led them to involve themselves in both domestic causes and international ones. By detailing Gay and Lesbian leftist support for Inez Garcia, a Puerto Rican San Francisco resident accused of murdering her rapist, alongside engagement with the Sandinistas’ implementation of socialism in Nicaragua during the late 1970s and 1980s, *Lavender and Red* argues that activists created a non-bifurcated, inclusive queer politics working toward several, overlapping goals in both the gay and lesbian liberation movement and within contemporary leftist politics.

One of the most important contributions Hobson makes to the historiography of gay and lesbian radicalism is her attempt to portray the movement as one not solely concerned with domestic politics. Hobson’s analysis illuminates gay and lesbian radicals as international actors involved in supporting Nicaragua’s Sandinista insurrection of the mid-to-late 1970s. As *Lavender and Red* shows, the geographic interconnectivity of San Francisco’s Mission District neighborhood that housed both queer countercultural radicals and Central American immigrants enabled the political collaboration of these two groups in their support of socialist Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua. Identifying the anti-gay and anti-communist New Right’s mutual condemnation of their activities, San Francisco Gay and Lesbian radicals offered their support to the Sandinista solidarity committees emerging in the neighborhood during this period. (98)

Hobson’s analysis details how queer activists drew out the political similarities between right-wing figures in the United States such as California state senator John Briggs – who authored the state’s Proposition 6, legislation which attempted to ban gay and lesbian teachers from working in public schools – Rhodesian white supremacist Ian Smith, and Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. “They termed Somoza, Smith, and Briggs ‘fascists’ who expressed ‘the last gasp of empire’ and were a ‘COMMON ENEMY’ to multiple communities – gay and lesbian, and straight, white and of color, globally and inside the United States.” (106) Such analysis prompted activists to form organizations such as Gay People for the Nicaraguan Revolution and unearth how the same U.S.-run citrus companies with operations in Latin America supported both Somoza and anti-gay activist Anita Bryant in 1979. (109) As Hobson’s scholarship shows, gay and lesbian intersectional analysis ultimately led to viewing respective struggles in the United States and Nicaragua as connected, thus expanding San Francisco’s support for the eventual Nicaraguan socialist project.

As Hobson outlines, queer radicals’ support for the Nicaraguan Revolution continued to flourish amidst the Reagan Administration’s covert funding for counterrevolutionary militias seeking to overthrow the Sandinistas during the 1980s. Furthermore, according to Hobson, these activists connected their
opposition to the Contra War to their political work surrounding the most pertinent issue facing the gay and lesbian community at that time – the AIDS crisis. *Lavender and Red* reveals the important story of gay and lesbian activists’ involvement in the development of the Sandinista Ministry of Health’s 1987 AIDS Prevention Program. During the late 1980s, gay and lesbian public health workers and activists whom had experienced the detriments of AIDS upon their San Francisco communities throughout the decade travelled to Central America to help implement AIDS awareness programs in Nicaragua. Groups like the AIDS Brigade distributed condoms, gave speaking tours designed to create awareness around issues such as homosexuality and safe sexual practices, and even printed full-page advertisements regarding AIDS prevention in Nicaraguan newspapers. (145-147) By travelling to Central America and distributing contraceptive devices, activists defied the 1985 U.S. economic blockade imposed upon Nicaragua. (144) Ultimately, this collaboration between the Sandinista Ministry of Health and U.S. queer activists helped to prevent AIDS-related death rate in Nicaragua from reaching the alarming levels it had in the contemporaneous United States. (150-2) In Hobson’s view, the gay and lesbian left’s ability to identify the struggles facing their own community and that of Nicaraguans as interconnected enabled the development of a set of politics that promoted awareness around issues that the gay and lesbian community faced and opposed U.S. militarism simultaneously. Hobson’s work provides an important glimpse into a previously understudied aspect of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement, revealing its aims to be global in scope. Yet, it is important to note that the perspectives revealed in the work remain those of activists in the United States. While a sizable portion of the manuscript remains devoted to the solidarity work of gay and lesbian activists in Sandinista Nicaragua, the opinions of Nicaraguan citizens and the Sandinista state regarding these activists’ activities remains sparse. While Emily Hobson’s source base is expansive and diverse, including oral histories and archival research, the vast majority remain English-language and United States-based. As anthropologist Roger Lancaster shows in his 1992 ethnography *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, 1992), a large swath of Nicaraguan society had become disillusioned by their government’s socialist project by the period of the 1987 AIDS Brigade. (185) With this in mind, it is worth questioning how these activists partnering with a government perceived by many Nicaraguans to have abandoned their utopian visions in favor of defense strategies may have been viewed by those living in the working-class neighborhoods of Managua. *Lavender and Red* ultimately achieves what it sets out to accomplish: a history of the evolving intersectional solidarity politics of the San Francisco Bay Area’s queer left – a story that is undoubtedly important. Yet, without an analysis of the collaboration between North Americans and Nicaraguans within this inter-American activism, Hobson’s internationalist inquiry remains firmly planted in the field of U.S. History.