



RESEARCH DIFFICULTIES RELATED TO QUEER HISTORY

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My research has centered on the semantic shifts of the word *queer*. The word *queer* has taken on many meanings since entering the English language roughly 500 years ago. It has a 150 year history of association with homosexuality, and during that time, *queer* has gone from being used as a self-identifier to being used almost exclusively as a slur and back again. While academic literature exists on *queer*'s reclamation in the early 1990s, on its function as a slur, and on its historical usage as a self-identifier in the early 20th century, there has not heretofore been any publications that attempt to compile this research and tell a coherent narrative of the history of *queer*. In the LGBTQ+ community outside of the academy, *queer*'s history is even less clear; we know that some of us use the word as a self-identifier and some of us still perceive it as a slur, but there's no clear conception about how we got from slur to self-identifier.

The lack of clarity around *queer*'s history is directly connected to having lost much of our community's history more broadly due to generational disconnect and systemic devaluing of queer lives, histories, and narratives. Some homosexual men in early 20th century metropolitan gay communities, namely New York City and London, identified as *queers* (Chauncey, Houlbrook). However, this isn't common knowledge, even within the LGBTQ+ community.

The generation of men who used *queer* as a self-identifier in the early 20th century (Chauncey 14-17, 101-111; Houlbrook 6-8, 136-137, 195-198) is now gone, and when they were alive, they were systemically kept out of spaces where they could record their stories or teach their history, such as schools and universities or venues where they could have their work published. At the very best, they were let into these spaces on the (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) condition that they remain closeted.

Because of the culture of secrecy and shame around queer identities, histories (even more current histories) are often deeply heteronormative and treat LGBTQ history as a niche that is not particularly relevant to the wider story. This is partially due to the various biases historians hold while choosing what information to research and write on, and partially due to various biases of past historians and archivists when they chose what information was important enough to be preserved - and thus what sources will be available for future historians to study.

This type of erasure can happen on a scale from the Nazis' 1933 raid and subsequent burning of the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, a pioneering Berlin sexology research institute that advocated for gay and transgender individuals (Irvine 1998), all the way down to slyly discarding a diary of someone chronicling their gay attraction, love, or sex life when sifting through potential archival materials. When materials of this nature *are* preserved, often the so-called homosexual content is selectively censored. When the material is not censored, contemporary notions of compulsory heterosexuality are often projected onto the authors by readers—both historians and those without an academic background. Essentially, authors are constantly read, by default, as straight, even when they explicitly discuss their own homo- or bisexuality with the language they had available to them. They may not have had the words we use today to describe their experiences; however, there is very little ambiguity in the following quote:

“I go into ecstasies every time I see the naked figure of a woman, such as Venus, for example. It strikes me as so wonderful and exquisite that I have difficulty in stopping the tears rolling down my cheeks.”

Anne Frank wrote this in her posthumously published diary (entry dated January 5, 1944), and yet the idea that Frank could have been attracted to women - sexually, romantically, or otherwise - is rarely discussed, especially when the book is taught in public schools. If the idea is brought up, it's often immediately dismissed as being 'disrespectful to the dead', as if quoting her diary directly might misrepresent her memory. Anne Frank is not the only historical figure who wrote about their experiences only to be dismissed by present-day readers. Langston Hughes, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Walt Whitman (Stern 2009) are among the countless other historical figures who wrote about their sexualities but are misread and misremembered as what we would today call heterosexual.

Because of this erasure, I have found that, often, I cannot prove or disprove my hypotheses. A lack of definitive records in the present isn't necessarily indicative of these experiences not having been lived in the past; they very well could have been, but the evidence either wasn't preserved or got erased. Regardless of whether this lack of preservation stemmed from malicious intent, it does mean that we do not have those sources to work with in the present. This means that even when scholars are interested in researching and telling this history, there are not sources for them to draw on. They cannot do the work if there is not anything to work with. As a result, they either broaden their research question to something where they can use the existing, more heteronormative source material, or they pick a different research project altogether.

For me, all this has meant that the project I believe is deeply important, relevant, and timely has been frustrating and difficult to complete. I've come to a lot of dead ends in my research, and hunting down sources that are relevant to my research question and that I can use has been difficult, to say the least.

Finding sources that not only engage with historical queerness, but engage with historical queerness in the specific and critical way this project demands, has been difficult. Cultural constructions of gender and sexuality change over time, and they have changed drastically over the 150-year timeframe this project encompasses. While same-sex desire, sex, and relationships have always existed, sexual identity (both gay and straight) as we know it today is a recent development. (Chauncey 12-3). The language earlier generations used to describe their sexualities does not map neatly onto the hetero/homosexual binary, which focuses on who you are attracted to; instead, much of the early 20th century metropolitan language surrounding sexual identity - *queer*, *fairy*, *trade*, and *normal* - was more concerned with gender performance and sexual practice than it was sexual attraction (Chauncey 14). In order to look at the past, we must be critical of the present-day lenses we are using to do so. Even as scholars, we often take our constructions of identity for granted and map them uncritically onto unidentical constructs of the past.

While my project isn't a direct comparison of these constructs of identity, it works with the words used to communicate these constructs and how they've shifted over time. This means that when scholars use *queer* as it is used today (*i.e.*, as a term that encompasses all non-heterosexual, non-cisgender identities) to describe any and all experiences from the past that might fall under that umbrella as we define it today as opposed to the very specific experience it was used to describe during the early 20th century, *queer* is rendered ineffective as a search term for finding sources that do engage with its early meaning. Because these sources have proved difficult to find, the project of this piece has been to sort through the records that have been preserved and the queer-inclusive histories that have been written and piece back together the history of *queer*, and ultimately tell its story.

Through these frustrations, I have stuck with this project because I believe that queer history work is genuinely crucial. Learning about the past in a way that includes LGBTQ+ folks is important for everyone, both those who identify as LGBTQ+ and those who do not. Queer-inclusive history is important because it pushes back on a commonly-held belief that queerness is a new phenomenon. Straight people often use this narrative as a way to dismiss queer folks' experiences and our need for social recognition and legal rights. The logic goes that if something is new, it is not valid, and therefore it is dismissible. Within the community, queer-inclusive and queer-centric history is important because it implicitly validates your experience and provides connection to a greater community. When you know that queer folks have always existed, you know that your experience is not a fad, a trend, or whatever else straight, cisgender people might try to dismiss it as. It's also important to be able to see yourself in history. Representation matters, and seeing people like you doing powerful and meaningful things empowers you to do meaningful things as well.

While working with queer history is difficult, it is of vital importance, and I believe it has the potential to change the way we conceptualize the LGBTQ+ community, as well as the potential of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. We must continue doing this work, as a way of rectifying past injustices and creating a better future.

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