

# QUEERING AMERICAN HISTORY: NEW PERSPECTIVES AND THE IMPACT OF ARCHIVAL ACTIVISM

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## ABSTRACT

“[I]n several respects, queer studies and critical history are products of the same post Enlightenment critique; both, for instance, are skeptical of universalist metanarratives, transcendent categories, sequential linearity, narratives of progression and ‘empty sameness’.” (Doan 2013, 6). But what does it mean to queer American history? How might queering it move us to ask new and different questions about it, regardless of whether we write about intimacy, eros, sexuality or love? If early scholarship chronicled the exploits of queer-identified people over time for an audience already open to the history of sexuality, the contemporary methodological struggle is aiming to suggest ways in which queering history might aid us in thinking more critically about how conventions, ideals, norms and, above all, practices gain traction and resonance in our history writing. To queer history instead of just writing histories of queerly situated or queer-identified people is to draw on a wide array of conceptual tools—often from other disciplines—to lay bare common assumptions about the world in which our subjects lived. It means stepping away from the family album approach and adding new layers of complexity to a shared historical past. This paper, in the spirit of decades’ worth of scholarship that sees queer as much as a methodological intervention as an epithet, sketches out: the way queer American history has been defined by academia and the issues and limits that emerged from research and scholarship; what it means to queer our common understanding of American history, untangling it from the excessive focus on the XX century; where queer history gets its fuel, the archive, what it means to reconstruct and preserve the memory of discriminated and written off communities and individuals.

**Keywords:** queer history; American history; queer archives.

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1620s, Thomas Morton broke from Plymouth Colony and founded Merrymount, which celebrated same-sex desire, atheism, and interracial marriage. Transgender evangelist Jemima Wilkinson, in the early 1800s, adopted the name Public Universal Friend, refused to use pronouns, fought for gender equality, and led a congregation in upstate New York. In the mid-nineteenth century, internationally famous Shakespearean actor Charlotte Cushman led an openly lesbian life, including a well-publicized “female marriage.” And in the late 1920s, Augustus Granville Dill was fired by W. E. B. Du Bois from the NAACP’s magazine *The Crisis* after being arrested for

a homosexual encounter. These are just a few moments of queer stories that fill what we call US or American history.

But what does it mean to queer American history? How might queering it move us to ask new and different questions, regardless of whether we write about intimacy, eros, sexuality or love? If early scholarship chronicled the exploits of queer-identified people over time for an audience already open to the history of sexuality, the contemporary methodological struggle is aiming to suggest ways in which queering history might aid us in thinking more critically about how conventions, ideals, norms and, above all, practices gain traction and resonance in our history writing.

To queer history rather than just writing histories of queerly situated or queer-identified people is to draw on a wide array of conceptual tools—often from other disciplines—to lay bare common assumptions about the world in which these subjects lived. It means stepping away from the family album approach and adding new layers of complexity to a shared historical past.

This essay, in the spirit of decades' worth of scholarship that sees *queer* as much as a methodological intervention as an epithet, sketches out: the way queer history has been defined by academia and the issues and limits that emerged from research and scholarship; what it means to queer our common understanding of American history; where queer history gets its fuel, its archive, what it means to reconstruct and preserve the memory of discriminated and written off communities and individuals.

## WHAT IS QUEER HISTORY?

In her 2018 historiographical essay “The Power of Queer History,” Regina Kunzel (2018) observed that scholarly efforts “to locate LGBT/queer history in the larger context of power, politics, and the state are more evident than ever” (1561). It has not always been the case. History departments, journals, and conference papers eventually found their way to define the field and contain it within specific boundaries of academic codification. What they found was a groundwork prepared by activists and people trained outside university halls that consisted in fundraising for gay history projects at pride marches and in bars, salvaging letters and photographs, turning rooms of their

houses into living archives. Their objective was of course well outside simple scientific curiosity. Gay and lesbian history was part of a political strategy of liberation, visibility, and representation, especially in the late 1980s. As John D’Emilio (1989) commented in a pioneering article published in the *Journal of American History*, “the practice of lesbian and gay history in its early years is inherently political” (435).

The main effort was concentrated on unearthing stories hidden from previous historical records, at the same time relabeling homosexuality from a medical diagnosis into a social, cultural, and eventually political identity, creating anthologies of lesbian and gay authors (Duberman et al. 1989), with much work focusing on recovering histories of lesbian and gay identity formation, community life, and social activism. The sources of this historical work lie therefore in personal collections, ephemera, oral stories, relabeled items in institutional archives, in an effort to redefine power relationships that previously canceled the lives of many. An effort that, as we will see through this essay, still continues nowadays.

The field’s activist origins in gay and feminist movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s led practitioners to consider how lesbian and gay history could help elucidate larger workings of power. D’Emilio’s essay (1983) “Capitalism and Gay Identity” argued that the emergence of new sexual identities in the US was linked to economic shifts, making gay identities and communities more possible. Anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1984) emphasized the implication of sexuality with larger historical forces in her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” She proposed a new field of study that would focus on non-normative sexuality and the policing of sexual difference, aiming to develop new theoretical tools to understand the fallacy of misplaced scale that burdened non-normative sexual practices with the weight of other social anxieties. Rubin’s vision for sexuality studies was expansive, focusing on phenomena such as populations, neighborhoods, settlement patterns, migration, urban conflict, epidemiology, and police technology.

Therefore, in the early days of this new historical field, D’Emilio and Rubin envisioned its engagement with politics, population, governance, and the economy. As Kunzel writes, the maturity and growing influence of the interdisciplinary field of queer

and transgender studies make it a powerful force in shaping historical thinking and practice. Today, the field is more diverse, thanks also to a growing archival body, with its focus shifting from gay identity to power and politics, emphasizing the importance of non-normative sexuality and gender in broader histories.

However, to better understand this process, a clarification of terms is necessary. What we now call *queer history* has been a complex and multifaceted field shaped by various historical approaches and methods, which also informed the way it was called and its relationship to the sources. What began essentially as gay history later evolved into gay and lesbian history. But it wasn't enough. The field had to respond to the epistemic shift of binding sexuality and identity which has been accompanying modern social sciences for more than half a century. Michel Foucault (1980) had already charted a way to understand modern sexuality, by describing how it witnessed a dramatic and consequential shift in the understanding of sex in the mid- to late nineteenth century, one that bound sexual acts and desires to sexual identities. Historians had by then started to excavate unfamiliar configurations of desire, gender, and sexuality in which sexuality was not yet marked off as a separate domain. It wasn't until the twentieth century that people regularly identified themselves using the vocabularies of LGBT's component parts. George Chauncey (1994) documented the use of gay by same-sex-desiring men in the 1940s, originally as a coded insider's vernacular, and later as a term to distinguish its users from gender-variant fairies or queers. *Transgender* is of much newer vintage, coined in a medical text by Dr. John Oliven in 1965 to describe transsexuality, popularized by cross-dressing activist Virginia Prince in 1969 in her newsletter *Transvestia*.<sup>1</sup>

“In the decades following the riots at the Stonewall Inn bar in 1969 that had set a movement into the public's eye, declarations of gay pride had been followed by those

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<sup>1</sup> See John F. Oliven, *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology: A Manual for the Physician and the Professions* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965); Robert Hill, “Before Transgender: Transvestia's Spectrum of Gender Variance, 1960–1980,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, 364–79 (New York: Routledge, 2013); Susan Stryker, “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity,” *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 145–57; Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017).

made in the name of other maligned, ignored, or new categories of sexual and gender identity, including lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and, more recently, intersex and asexual” (Hanhardt 2019). The commitment to include all these experiences led to create an ever-expanding acronym, GLB, LGBT, LGBTIA, and more.

Conceived in the 1990s in academic, organizational, and activist circles LGBT is therefore a remarkably recent denomination, an umbrella term used to draw together and represent a political collectivity in the present day, and even adding a plus symbol at the end, constitutes a limit when trying to include the multitudes of categories involved in the study of sexual and gender identities. Moreover, while they have been taken up and transformed around the globe, the sexual languages and assumptions embedded in LGBT are distinctly Western in origin. This is one of the reasons why in the last decades new linguistic dynamics have brought a new terminology to the field, by reclaiming an old term, which, in the words of Hanhardt (2019), “can be a less clunky way to refer to LGBT history but can also signal the study of an expansive or inclusive approach to sex/gender difference and/or power”: queer.

Queer is surely historically bounded, coming into usage in the US in its sexual connotation in the 1910s, lobbed as a slur and appropriated as a term of self-identification among some same-sex-desiring men. Scholars in interdisciplinary queer studies and queer theory forged queer into a powerful analytic that unsettled the notion of sexual identity and focused instead on questions of normativity to explore the processes by which some forms of sexual and gender identity and behavior are rewarded, and others stigmatized.<sup>2</sup> “Some scholars have found it useful as both a critical and a descriptive tool, attracted by its troubling of sexual identity, its capacious reach

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<sup>2</sup> For conversations between queer studies and queer history, see Lisa Duggan, “Making It Perfectly Queer,” *Socialist Review* 22 (1992): 11–31; Jeffrey Escoffier, Regina Kunzel, and Molly McGarry, “The Queer Issue: New Visions of America’s Lesbian and Gay Past,” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995): pp. For interdisciplinary queer studies’ engagement with history and historical method, see Heather Love, *Feeling Backward. Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). For recent and ambitious efforts to bring queer theory and queer history into conversation, see Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

across a range of non-normative sexual and gender subject positions, and its ability to expose taken-for-granted assumptions, institutions, and arrangements beyond the realm of sexuality and gender” (Kunzel 2018, 1565).

Up through the nineteenth century the word was primarily used to mark anything considered odd or outside social norms. It was often but not always offered as epithet and ascribed to others rather than claimed for oneself; and by the twentieth century it was most used for reasons of perceived sexual or gender non-conformity. “In the 1960s and 1970s, a new social movement called for the rejection of labels such as “queer” and even “homosexual” (itself seen as pejorative and medicalizing) in favor of proud proclamations like ‘Gay Is Good’” (Hanardt 2019).

Therefore, that generation of activists was quite surprised to see the term re-emerging in the 1990s, spurred by political organizations, young activists, and academic scholarship. The aim was to set the word into a new play that changed the language and the methods of both social movements and scholarship for years to come. Since its entrance into the mainstream market also as a substitute for an ever-expanding acronym, the term has been entering public debate and discourse ever more. The reaction has been mixed. Previous generations of activists, mindful of previous negative meanings, were suspicious, especially because the word quickly became a marketing tool for TV shows, films, books, bars, food, vacation packages, a capitalist appropriation that diluted any new meaning or political impact. Moreover, the term is not ubiquitous. *Queer politics*, *queer theory* and *queer history* are concepts that do not always coincide, but activism and theory both mainly agree on the fact that sexual identities are socially constructed and historically specific. *Queer* indexed a range of practices and identities that strayed from the ideals of the heterosexual family, be they held by so-called straight or gay people, or that stood outside a particular modern understanding of sexuality as constitutive of the self rather than as a set of situated practices. So, when accompanied by the word “history,” how does all of this fit in?

While Lisa Duggan (1995) noted the issues raising from an approach that borrowed many terms and lenses from a still-new (at the time) social movement, Cathy Cohen (1997) highlighted how the use of queer often defaulted to an understanding of

power based on the binary of heterosexual versus homosexual that ignored the interplay of race, gender, and class. Still today, many works that claim to use the framework of queer history, use it just to describe the social and historical situatedness of sexual and gender identities, referring to those who participate in same-sex intimacy or adopt non-conventional gender and who today might be marked by an L, G, B and/or T. This is what we could call ‘the family album approach.’ However, by anchoring her analysis in a history of black feminism critique, Cohen demonstrated that sexuality and gender are inextricable from race and class, and that they are arranged in different fashions for different purposes and different populations.

Trying to get away from just situating LGBT stories in a wide heteronormative narrative, scholarship has since drawn on insights and frameworks from within and beyond the discipline of history and started to approach gender and sexuality in tandem with racialization and political economy—a move that not only expands which LGBT subjects are analyzed, but that takes the very production of the normative and non-normative as an object of study.<sup>3</sup> Considered together, these works provide histories of queer relations that include but are not restricted to same-sex desire, including the domestic arrangements of single immigrant men, the kin care of criminalized women, the movements of other migrants, or the trade of various stigmatized pleasures. These works analyze the broad racial and economic landscape that has defined the parameters for emergent sexual and gender minority identities, emphasizing patterns of economic development and social welfare policies within cities or rural areas, and often looking at how these processes have shaped LGBT social movements.

These works draw on both traditional and less conventional sources to make an argument about desires, practices, and identities that are often left unnamed in the

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<sup>3</sup> Earliest examples are Siobhan Somerville, *Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Stephen Dillon, *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State* (Durham, University of North Carolina Press, 2018). More recent examples include Julio Capó Jr., *Welcome to Fairyland: Queer Miami before 1940* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

archives of police, migration, and social welfare records, including cultural representations such as plays, film, novels, songs, autobiographies, and material culture. Therefore, *queer* is not just a way to do LGBT-spotting in various moments in history, it is to rewrite our common understanding of social and political processes including a layer of always present but never analyzed sexual and gender identities.

Another example comes from black urban and feminist history. Works by Kwame Holmes (2011) and Treva Ellison show that “ideas of social disorder and strategies of state control conjoined racial and sexual logics about social pathology that most squarely affected black working-class and poor communities, LGBT and not, during late twentieth century economic restructuring” (Hanhardt 2019). Nic John Ramos’s research (2019) on Los Angeles’s hospital system provides a queer perspective on how postwar ideals of healthiness shaped both the provision of services as well as the management of newly defined, marginalized populations, including but not restricted to low-income transgender women of color. Sarah Haley (2016) writes a history of the incarceration of black women in Georgia at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, in which she demonstrates how ideas of gendered and racial deviance were used to create the idea of acceptable womanhood and, in turn, violently punish black women.<sup>4</sup>

However, as Kunzel (2018) notes, “the field, even with its substantive investments and theoretical preoccupations remains however largely focused on the U.S. and Western Europe. A growing body of scholarship set in non-Western contexts is drawing attention to the limits of Western terminology and analysis for understanding historical and contemporary sexual practices and identities and calling into question some of the field’s most taken-for-granted assumptions” (1581). Some of the new historical work context is radically questioning the ubiquitous nature of the concepts of lesbian, gay, transgender, and queer to non-Western contexts and marking the distance and

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<sup>4</sup> See also Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).



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dissonance between Western and non-Western sexual worlds.<sup>5</sup> In his provocative book, Joseph Massad (2007) argues that the notion of homosexuality was alien to Arab same-sex traditions, owing the devaluing of non-normative sexual expressions to Eurocentric influence over Arab culture, characterizing the globalizing of modern sexual and gender identities as part of a colonial project. In his study of the history of non-normative sexuality in southern Africa, Marc Epprecht (2013) considers the story of Western imposition from a different angle, documenting the ways in which homophobia, rather than homosexuality, was imported into the region by European colonists. “As the field expands its scope to engage other political and geopolitical scenarios, we can look forward to work that will further provincialize the U.S. and Western Europe” (Kurzel 2018, 1581).

## QUEERING AMERICAN HISTORY: WHAT IT MEANS

Entangling what *queering* means in the field of American History might give us an example of the task many face when dealing with the issue within their own national and global narratives.

Although by now much literature has been published on queer aspects of various moments of US history, much is left to be uncovered and analyzed. Queering America and its place in the world is not a straightforward practice, it operates on multiple levels and registers. From a LGBTQ+ History perspective, it might be a strategy to recover non-conforming experiences in a way that re-writes or completes chapters of the nation’s ample historiography. For others, queering is a more disruptive scientific pursuit, dismembering conventional notions of what constitutes power, how sexuality and identity shape authority, policy, and privilege, and what that entails within the context of the US’ relations with the world. “Queering, as many of the participants in

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<sup>5</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Megan J. Sinnott, *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Ruth Vanita, *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

this conversation argue, not only disturbs hetero-normative assumptions about sexuality but ultimately pushes back on how we conceive of power relations in spaces as intimate as the bedroom or as geopolitically capacious as the United Nations” (Belmonte et al. 2016, 19). This paragraph will conceptualize the theoretical terms of this issue, trying to describe ways through which queer can disrupt historical research in and about the United States.

Whether it helps unearthing previously untold stories of queer people or disrupting heteronormative conceptions of power, a queer take on American History could be described more like a lens than a method, a new way of seeing various aspects of a nation’s history. It transforms the nature of archival research, making the archive itself a place of reappropriation and emancipation. Historical research on structurally discriminated communities is not neutral when the historian has to question the very way items and documents were cataloged, buried, discovered, obtained. For these reasons, and as previous work already demonstrates (Chauncey 1994; Dean 2001; Johnson 2004; Canaday 2009), this is not just an academically interesting side narrative. Queer is much more threaded through the history of the United States than we could possibly imagine just a few decades ago.

However, wearing queer lens means primarily changing our own methodological approach and critique, by including what Shanon Fitzpatrick calls “domains of the intimate” in our arguments (Belmonte et al. 2016, 21). This means also engaging closely with queer theory. As Fitzpatrick brilliantly suggests, this interdisciplinary dialogue is key in queering the history of the United States and its relations with the world. Building on Sarah Ahmed’s book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), and its clever take on the overlap between orientation and the Orient, she suggests that “structures of national and international power produce and reproduce themselves by suppressing and reorienting deviant ways of being and modes of affiliation” (17), through laws, policies, wars and media representation. At the same time, queer identities and political actions disrupt patterns of influence and power. In this context the category of queerness needs to be expanded and redefined constantly to comprehend in a coherent way how the domains of the intimate and identity politics shaped American politics and historical processes.

One field we can use as an example of this is US imperial history. Ann Stoler (2006) already established how imperial power is consolidated and defined through the intimate, and she is not alone in this. Of the same years are the works of Laura Briggs (2002), tracing how reproductive politics played a role in the consolidation of US power in Puerto Rico, and of Mary Renda (2001), demonstrating how the US occupying forces in Haiti in 1915 engaged with the Black Republic using especially matters of the intimate in a paternalistic way. Other historians, even if they did not intend to queer American history per se, gave us useful instruments for such an analysis. For example, the groundbreaking work of David Johnson (2004) on the Lavender Scare that helped redefine the place of political moral panics of the 1950s in the global context of the Cold War, or Joanne Meyerowitz's (2002) book on how Christine Jorgensen helped reshape the concept of sex and gender in the United States.

Their research helps us broaden and widen the definition of queer as a disruption of heteronormativity in historical research. It provides a way for us to understand how national and global processes have "informed, coalesced, redefined, and been in conversation with queer expressions and machinations" (Belmonte et al. 2016, 23). It does this by qualifying subjectivities that defy the traditional hierarchical discourse, privileging the heterosexual, the cisgender, the masculine, the gender-conforming. *Queer* therefore can be used as a noun and a verb, as an object of research, an idea that circulates and scripts personal practices, affects, narratives, and as an action, creating a parallel historiographical strategy that in the end disrupts and rebuilds the national narrative. As Lee Edelman states, "queerness can never define an identity, it can only disturb one" (Edelman, 2004, 17). This is where archives become the main focus of any queer take on American History. The activist origin of the analysis is its main strength, since the historian is able to tell a story starting from how, when and where archival items were obtained and described, the power struggle that lies beneath this process, the act of political revindication that archiving means.

As evident by these few pages, queering history therefore does not mean to write a history of LGBTQ+ people or movements. Just like Gender History is not Women's History, Queer History is not always necessarily LGBTQ+ History. With the help of

queer theory (Sedgwick 1985; Butler 1990), qualifying queer subjectivities is not just an exercise to create and enrich a yearbook-like narrative, it serves the purpose of exposing the ways in which a binary logic of oppositions has been naturalized and primarily used in our historical narratives. Sedgwick identified not only a socially constructed homo/hetero binary, but also other artificial oppositions such as masculine/feminine, natural/artificial, growth/decadence, health/illness, urbane/provincial, and so on. Postcolonial approaches have added many more binaries, concerning race, civilization, modernity, and power politics. In this context, queering explains how constructs of sexuality and otherness within these binaries shaped policies and historical processes, defined notions of citizenship, informed transnational relations of state actors, non-state entities and activists, intersecting the term with constructs of race, gender and privilege. This becomes apparent especially if we analyzed how potent notions of deviance have been deployed to advance domestic and global agendas in the last century, from colonial policies to the scares of the 1950s, to the history of the HIV pandemic, to the recent wave of criminalization of queer identities in many countries.

That is also how a queer take on America can fundamentally change how its history is understood, not simply adding another interesting perspective. Can someone really understand US urban history without taking into account Chancey's *Gay New York*? Can anyone grasp the complexity of the Red Scare without grappling with Johnson's *The Lavender Scare*? Without Canada's *The Straight State* can the US state be analyzed?

In a way these works open the field also to its relationship with a transnational and global space, by complicating a certain narrative of exceptionalism, by unearthing the process of the formation of a straight-defined concept of citizenship. This is evident in Canada's work, but also in Johnson's, as they describe how foreign and domestic policies converged in ways that helped codify that straight state. *Gay New York* demonstrated how working class and ethnic and racial minorities proved critical to the construction of the homo/heterosexual binary that organizes our sexual lives even today. The crystallization of that binary—certainly by World War II—has been used, and rightfully so, as the foundation for so many other studies. These results, while

adding a global lens, leave us with many more questions to be answered. The Italian immigrants Chauncey introduced in his text, for example, did not just appear in New York City. What global processes led them there? How were they gendered? Queered? What about those who got left behind? Similarly, have other states been designed or engineered as straight in the twentieth century? Was the United States, in this case, exceptional?

Similarly, since US power's stakes in the modern world rest largely on what the west understands human rights to be, studying how sexuality became imaginable to American policymakers, lobbyists, activists as a human right might sharpen the views of a historiography that still has little to say about it.

The possibility of a global perspective might very well expand current scholarship, helping it escape an inflationist focus on the recent past and on the retention of a national framework. The turn of the century, for example, offers us many interesting research questions. For instance, how did the transnational network-building and exchanges that characterized the Progressive Era, as explored by Daniel Rodgers (2000) and others, influence the conceptualization of normative and non-normative sexual behaviors and sexed bodies in the United States? How did the growing resources of American philanthropic, scientific, and educational institutions affect global conversations about modern sexuality? How did the far-reaching American *culture industry* that developed in the interwar era codify and disseminate representations of gay identities, appearances, lifestyles, and even structures of intimacy and feeling? How has America's role as a global semiotic center shaped historical patterns and processes of global queering over the course of the twentieth century to the present?

None of this would be directly found in a national archive or official repository, and yet the interconnections between queer and other more established historical perspectives are myriad. The queer historian therefore finds themselves in front of a challenge far greater than the one encountered by their fellow researchers. The archives themselves have been built to replicate forms of violence and inequality over those living in the margins of straight cis citizenship, thus influencing the scholarship of

historians accessing the material. Overcoming the silence of the archives is a fundamental mountain to climb. Building on Touillot's work *Silencing the Past* (1995), the issue is how and if historians can redistribute the inherent power of document depositories and the history institutions meant them to tell, how to recover voices that were literally and figuratively left at the margins without making them complicit in the silencing of them. Creating new archives, through oral histories and community engagement, for instance, remains a critical step, as the next paragraph discusses.

### THE QUEER ARCHIVE

This leads to a final point of this essay, the queer archive. This is a field where queer studies go back to the activist nature that characterized their early years. For decades, members of marginalized groups have collected, preserved, and curated collections of materials for and by communities through the work of individual activist archivists. For underrepresented groups the creation of community archives was a political act in defiance of marginalization (Flinn and others, 2009; Stevens and others, 2010). Furthermore, community archives were a way to provide a safe space for community members to come together for study, leisure reading, and socializing. This paragraph will examine, drawing also from the author's personal experience, what challenges they face now that the demand of a queer perspective in historical research has become widespread in mainstream academic institutions. The Invisible Histories Project (IHP) provides a useful case to help us expand our understanding of these issues (Monaco 2021). The project began in Alabama in 2015 when co-founders Joshua Burford and Maigen Sullivan began working on collecting materials and obtained a non-profit status. By 2018 IHP located eighteen new LGBTQ collections in Alabama; identified three repository archive partners; helped develop three undergraduate courses at two state universities; organized and held the inaugural Queer History South Conference; mentored 4 undergraduate and graduate interns/scholars; and started expanding their work into Mississippi and Georgia.

IHP, through the support of a network of local institutions in Alabama, including the University of Alabama, has become a community center serving the Birmingham

area through archival collections, circulating libraries of books and videos, and public programming. Located in the Deep South, IHP is not in an epicenter of queer rights activism, as compared to San Francisco which is home to the larger and more well-known GLBT Historical Society, or the National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles and the Lesbian Herstory in New York. However, the smaller scale gives an understanding that may expand our appreciation of queer historical archives, and their work beyond these better-known and more established organizations.

Creating a community archive comes from a need and a void. The lack of representation or access to records from their pasts is the main drive that leads community members to start the long process of collecting materials and finding a place for them. Much of the literature on the matter emphasizes the conflict at the root of this process. Marginalized groups come to distrust institutional archives after seeing their lives and history misrepresented or completely erased. As noted by both Joan Nestle and Maxine Wolfe in their histories of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, there was a great need to create a community archive to document histories that were being lost or ignored (Nestle 1990). As Andrew Flinn (2007) also notes, “when mainstream archival institutions marginalized certain groups these communities created their own archives and collected materials that would otherwise have been lost to the historical record” (158). This is not a new phenomenon. Archivist Elizabeth Knowlton published in 1987 her report *Documenting the Gay Rights Movement*, which showed that institutional archivists had little knowledge of gay archives or gay rights movements more generally. The only queer community records available in these cities were stored in individuals’ homes or in community archives.

The conflict with institutional archives led in time to a strong motivation to maintain control over the communities’ records even when universities and state archives began collecting queer materials as well. As Nestle wrote about the Lesbian Herstory Archives, she and other founders wanted “our story [...] preserved by us” (Nestle 1990, 87). The activist nature of the archive therefore influences the way it is funded, how the material is cataloged and how it can be accessed. The same applies to the IHP. Coming from a similar experience in Charlotte, NC, Burford and Sullivan

viewed their work not as an interesting academic endeavor, but as a journey of self-discovery, for them and for their community. However, creating a queer community archive in these times means to have bigger and better funded institutions competing for the same material, now that queer found its way in established academic research. “Community archives connect people with their history. However, better known institutions are hoovering out smaller communities, taking out of context their story and moving it off site” (Monaco 2021). The project therefore meant for the repositories to stay local, to offer Alabamans a chance to reconnect with a queer history they were not allowed to know or learn in the past, and at the same time to counter a queer narrative that centers on coastal metropolises. How to fund such an endeavor becomes therefore the main challenge.

The literature has shown the importance of community support in maintaining these archives (Bastian and Alexander 2009). In her article about the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Thistlethwaite (1998) emphasized the continuing need to rely on support from lesbian community members in order to preserve and provide access to records. Sometimes the need for funding and at the same time the urge to maintain strict control over the archives leads to decisions like that of the Lesbian Herstory’s, namely, to refuse government funding, as its founders and volunteers do not believe the government can be relied upon and that support must come from lesbian communities.

Other institutions, which encounter serious funding issues, decide instead to partner with institutional archives, donating their collections for safekeeping and continuing public access. This has led in many cases to further conflict and lack of understanding, like in the case of the donation Herstory Archives made to the New York Public Library. The reason for relationships going sour is most of the time due to significantly different approaches. Community archives’ discontinuous influx of funding has an impact on staffing, particularly in terms of whether an archive is managed by paid staff or volunteers (X and others 2009). This diversity in staffing and funding models leads to differing levels of support to the researchers, but also to a different way to manage collections, which can create distrust and confrontation with professional archivists in more established institutions.



When IHP won a Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant in 2018, they used it to expand the project in neighboring states in Georgia and Mississippi, creating a network of repositories managed by both professional archivists and volunteers. This combined two main objectives of storing this kind of materials, preserving community history and serving a growing academic interest in these issues. “Our objective became twofold: to create a way for us to keep local histories local, while at the same time elevating them to other places. So instead of moving them to New York, we can keep them in the South, and then partner with other organizations nationally, to let them know where these collections are. So, we're bringing people to us instead of the other way around” (Monaco 2021).

Nontraditional ways to fund and staff these archives leads also to a very different kind of materials historians can expect to find. Collection development in community archives, more so than in other archives, is dictated by community members and the nature of their donations. The resultant archival collections reflect the passions and experiences of individual donors and often include material not traditionally considered in/as archival records. IHP's collections include artifacts from Alabama's first pride march held in 1989, to poetry written by a gay Alabaman in the early 1900s, to queer bar guides from across the Southeast, and artifacts from the University of Alabama Gay Student Union.

Buttons, ballroom trophies, uniforms, art and furniture, all these ephemera, commonly thought as museum pieces, find their place in community archives' repositories, making them a place of interconnections among different cultural information sources, and a holistic space for research, uniting the mission of libraries, museums and archives (Trant 2009). The challenge, therefore, is to find a way to describe and make accessible this material.

Descriptive standards, especially those relating to historically marginalized communities, are crucial to how queer history is researched and then written. Sanford Berman's 1971 piece on discrimination in the Library of Congress Subject Headings, together with subsequent work by Ellen Greenblatt (2011) and others, looked at ways to eliminate discriminatory and derogatory words in existing thesauri and have advocated

creating alternatives to use when describing certain collections. Now, many controlled vocabularies and thesaurus are created specifically for cataloging queer collections, like the one created by Dee Michel (Johnson 2007).

The experience of smaller archives like IHP adds information about the need for specific ways to describe the material. One of the main issues Burford and Sullivan faced was the fact that, outside big coastal cities, queer people do not always want to donate to archival collections. “For some it is about privacy, it's about the fact that they have lived in a small town their whole life. And they're nervous about having their name attached to a heading that says gay or lesbian or queer” (Monaco 2021). But the other reason is a deep skepticism towards archival institutions, that until recently have chosen to exclude people and their stories from the mainstream national history, through confused denominations and past censorship. This has led to further work for archivists to change the way these stories were cataloged.

“Archive used to render our histories invisible under obscure terminology and catalogues. Now we are asking people to donate their own life story to us. It's not a small ask” (Monaco 2021). This demonstrates again the influence of community members over the archives, that translated also in different policies of accessibility. Many queer community archives do not have closed stacks, making their materials available for browsing, or have different access policies based on the type of resources, or the availability of volunteers on site. IHP's mission included training for community members on how to preserve their material at home even if it is not their intention to donate yet. That is because for these institutions, like for early queer historians, archiving constitutes political activism. “If we found one t-shirt from the very first gay bar in the deep south, I would rather have that thing touched by a million people until it fell apart, then to have it set in a box for one hundred years, otherwise that would be simple hoarding, not archiving” (ibid.).

What the archivists behind this project realized early on is that collecting material was a powerful gesture that went beyond the confines of academic scholarship. In Burford's words: “We want to give Southern queer history back to the queer South, and so we want to be collecting in as many Southern states as we can, we want to

preserve as much history as we can, and we want the younger generation that's coming behind us to understand they are part of something much larger than they've ever imagined" (Monaco 2021).

Even if researchers have found high levels of involvement in community archives, the archives still face challenges in their continued survival. As the current literature reveals, community archivists must always develop sources of funding and find ways to increase their visibility. Meeker (1999) noted this need in his article on the GLBT Historical Society, emphasizing the importance of community involvement and visibility in generating the funds needed to support the archives' work. Sustainability is one of the most pressing current and future challenges identified by researchers for community archives as they continue to serve their missions of collecting, preserving, and providing access to records by, from, and important to queer communities (Bastian and Alexander 2009, 105).

From an historian's point of view using a queer archive presents more challenges than more established traditional institutions. There are numerous ethical and practical considerations when endeavoring in a historical inquiry into archival records of members of marginalized communities. Being wary of the history of the archive itself, how it operates, what kind of material donation it gets and from whom always provides a useful finding aid. The help of the archivist therefore becomes crucial. Categories and identity that today have become widespread in our public discourse did not exist up until a few decades ago, that is reflected in catalogs and words used in documents. Together with the already mentioned institutional *archival silence*, the first challenge comes from the fact that archival evidence works against queer history purposes.

The example of the Broken Future Project helps visualize the issue. Started in 2019, Broken Futures is a community-based queer heritage project in the United Kingdom, "it explores the history of 'ordinary' men in Berkshire who were charged with buggery, gross indecency and indecent assault between 1861 and 1967 by training community volunteers in archival and genealogical research" (Broken Futures Project 2021).

The challenges faced by archivists and historians in this project are many. First, the concept of *homosexuality* did not exist in the period of interest and this is reflected in the way sources are described and cataloged over the centuries. Therefore, the strategy was to adopt a “acts-based approach, highlighting the same-sex sex that the individuals in our study engaged in but not making any claims to identity categories in the majority of cases” (Broken Futures Project 2021, 5). This of course, has limited the scope and results obtainable from the sources, not being able to describe a full picture of the marginalization of the queer community of Berkshire within the national legal system. The research was also skewed towards cisgender male experiences, since sex between women was not prosecuted and transgender people were not explicitly mentioned in court and police papers. However, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence when researching marginalized communities “we must be aware of historical ways of conceptualizing samesex desire that are linked to gender – especially that which links same-sex desire to effeminacy and a broader gender non-conformity” (Broken Futures Project 2021, 7).

The other ethical conundrum encountered by researchers was around their responsibility towards the people whose lives they were unearthing. Many of these individuals saw with a sense of shame their encounter with the criminal justice system, a low point in their lives and a source of great misery. There was also the danger of *outing* people to their surviving families, especially when studying the recent past. Community archives can help navigate these issues establishing a much-needed dialogue between academia and the queer community.

That is because queer history is not uncontentious. The desire of many today to see their identity finally unearthed and represented in history and archival collections has brought an exciting new era in research, giving us new perspectives on so many national and global phenomena. However, this must be balanced with a full grasp of the ethical implications inherent with dealing with marginalized communities. *Queering* must be seen not as a mandate, or a way to stay up to date with the new academic trends. It is both an opportunity and a responsibility, to encapsulate the troubling setting stage of these stories and the way they were recorded in such a manner that serves

historiographical inquiry and at the same time allows present communities to understand, to engage and to reclaim their past.

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