

Is Everyone *Queer* Now?

A Linguistic Investigation into the Reclamation of the Word *Queer*

by

G Ryan



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To the LGBTQ community members who have offered me unconditional support





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## Abstract

In the past thirty years, *queer* has been a slur, an academic theory term, and a word that intends to capture all LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) identities. The ‘queer community’ is used as a catch-all phrase, but who or what the queer community is remains ambiguous. Through the process of linguistic reclamation, many people in the LGBTQ community have shifted the meaning of *queer* from derogatory to acceptable, for both people in the community and those outside it.

Delving into what makes a word a powerful social and cultural tool, I examine how *queer* is used in a range of online publications. Using the News on the Web (NOW) corpus, an online linguistic database, I search for trends and pattern in how LGBT identity terms appear in conjunction with *queer*. Additionally, I investigate how self-identified butch bloggers and their readers navigate and negotiate the complexities of shifting terminology.

My findings support that *queer*’s meaning is constantly shifting. Sometimes *trans* isn’t *queer*, and other times it is. *Queer* is used to refer to non-straight, non-cisgender people, but simultaneously struggles to refer to a unified community. The word and identity of *queer* challenges and complicates the idea of an LGBTQ community, often fracturing it between sexuality and gender identities. Why does it matter if a person is *queer*, *gay*, *trans*, or all of the above? Beyond respecting people’s preferences, the words used can shape social perceptions and connotations of a group. Who or what is really *queer*, and who has the power and authority to decide this?

Key Words: queer theory, queer, linguistic reclamation, critical discourse analysis, corpus-based research, LGBTQ community



## CONTENTS

Figures	i
Introduction: Who or What is Really <i>Queer</i> ?	1
Chapter 1: <i>Queer</i> : queering conversations about queer people for decades	7
Does Changing Words Matter?	7
The Process of Linguistic Reclamation	10
Queer Theory	17
<i>Queer</i> : A Historical Snapshot	20
A Contemporary, Personal Reclamation Story	24
Chapter 2: Let's Talk about Now, using NOW (News On the Web) Corpus Data	27
NOW Corpus Overview	27
Top Ten Collocates	29
Everything Under the <i>Queer</i> Umbrella (or not)	31
Everything Under the <i>Queer</i> Half-Umbrella (sometimes)	34
Outside the Umbrella (sometimes): <i>Transgender</i> and <i>Trans</i>	38
Chapter 3: Queer(ish) Bloggers Blogging Queerly	41
A Queer Methodology	41
Miscommunication	42
The Value of Specificity	46
(Dis)Respectful Language	49
Why this discourse matters	52
Queerly Concluding the Investigation of <i>Queer</i>	55
Works Consulted	59



Figures

Figure 1: Google Books NGram Viewer of <i>queer</i>	16
Figure 2: Normalized frequencies of <i>queer</i> in the NOW Corpus, 2010-2017	16
Table 1: NOW Corpus Collocate Data	29





## Who or What is Really *Queer*?

I'm queer.<sup>1</sup> I say this first to acknowledge my position within the community that I'm researching, and second to name my use of the word as a deliberate decision. It is an identity that is important to me and a way that I am able to disrupt some of the norms and binaries that are often societally imposed. Notably, especially given the focus of this thesis, I have received explicit pushback regarding my use of *queer* as a self-identifier, even in places that were being cognizant of language use and its changeability.

In 2016, I helped to write and edit a document for USA Swimming, the national governing body of swimming in this country, "LGBTQ Resource Inclusion Guide." This was part of a larger project in which a series of documents were published that addressed cultural inclusion strategies for various marginalized communities. These guides were written as educational pieces with both background information and suggestions for how people in the swim community could improve the environment of the sport. I contributed a brief biography and several quotes to this guide. What was published in the final version included the statement: "As a genderqueer<sup>2</sup> swimmer, I have to balance the love I have for my sport and my team with the struggle of lacking a space to express my identity." This quote is pulled from a larger text that I submitted that spoke to the challenges of being a non-binary person in a sport with binary gender categories. The quote was published on page five of the guide.

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<sup>1</sup> I use this term to describe the fact that I am not exclusively attracted to any one gender or sex, and also that I do not feel attraction based on physical features. This expansiveness of *queer* allows me to be accurate in representing myself, while also choosing to be more or less specific based upon my audience. If I am surrounded by people who are part of the LGBTQ community, I will be more specific about my chosen identities labels than I am if I am talking to a group of people who are less familiar with the vocabulary.

<sup>2</sup> Genderqueer is a way I describe being transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming. I use *they/them* pronouns and do not identify as either a man or a woman, but somewhere both in between and completely outside of these constructed categories.

On page nine of the guide, the word *queer* is listed under the heading of “Terms to Avoid.” This list is prefaced with the explanation that language in the LGBTQ community is constantly changing and, therefore, it can be difficult to know when a word is offensive or not. I agree entirely with that statement, and I agree that many of the terms on the list are controversial, highly contested, and in my opinion offensive<sup>3</sup>. But *queer* is the very first word listed, and there is no acknowledgement that this term may be different and less off-limits than the others. I use it myself just pages earlier. In the editing process, I urged USA Swimming to remove *queer* from this list and offered my reasoning. Clearly, this was not effective; *queer* remained on the list of terms to avoid.

Why is there such resistance to the reclamation of the word *queer*? How widespread and prevalent is this resistance? Who gets to decide if and how a word is used? I use the word *queer*, many of my peers within the LGBTQ<sup>4</sup> community use the word *queer*, and yet I couldn’t convince a group of USA Swimming administrators that *queer* should be in the general vocabulary section. Language is important to people, myself included, identity terms probably especially so, and is saturated with opinions and emotions which are the foundation for debate over who or what is *queer*. This thesis explores the contestations of *queer* more thoroughly than any paper for a class would allow.

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<sup>3</sup> The other words on the list are: *homosexual*, *hermaphrodite*, *gaydar*, *queen*, *transvestite*, and *lifestyle*.

<sup>4</sup> I am using LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Questioning or Queer) here as an umbrella acronym for the queer community, acknowledging that not everyone who identifies within this community uses the term *queer* or any other of these labels, and that this is not an exhaustive or comprehensive list of identity terms. In addition, I understand the inherent hierarchy of this acronym, and the fact that I begin with lesbian is a choice that does not indicate I believe this to be the paramount identity. I am most comfortable and familiar with this format, though GLBT, TBLG, LGBTQIA, LGBTQ+ and others have occurred in my readings. When speaking for myself throughout this project, I will use LGBTQ. When quoting others, I will adhere to the format the author exhibits.

I started by saying I'm queer. I'm also white, able-bodied, and middle class. All of these identities impact my experiences and perspectives. I have privileges and access that enable me to be a part of this institution and have the opportunity to execute this research. I want to acknowledge those dynamics. Beyond that, most of the bloggers I cite in this project share those identities: queer<sup>5</sup>, white, able-bodied, and middle class. This is important to note because it impacts the experiences and perspectives each person has, how they frame their arguments, and what they leave out. It also speaks to how much I can or can't relate to the author's experiences. Many of these authors don't talk about race or racial politics, one of the things that being a white person permits. Being able-bodied means that most of the authors speak about traveling or entering spaces without considering accessibility needs. The economic position of middle class suggests access to certain resources, networks, and experiences that are not possible for everyone.

From my perspective, *queer* is an acceptable and even commendable word. It offers various opportunities to circumvent and undermine binaries which can restrict and erase identities. Whether or not you agree with me depends on many different positionalities and life experiences. As I will show, over time *queer* is used more and more in conversation and publication. It acts as a buzzword that is used to achieve certain reactions. For example, several different television shows, "Queer as Folk" (2000-2005), "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" (2003-2007), "Queers" (2017), and "Queer Eye" (2018), exemplify the commodification of *queer* in their titles, as they don't explain why or in what way it is meant. The titles are designed to elicit emotional reactions from people. For queer folks, it is a locus of identification and

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<sup>5</sup> Not all of the authors self-identify as queer. I am using this as an umbrella term here and as a way to show parallels to my own identity. The self-identification of the authors will be further discussed in section two.

empathy, spurring on the urge to engage with the material. For people resistant to the word *queer*, or to queer people in general, the names may spark anger, frustration, and the desire to resist the marketing and broadcasting of these productions. Either way, the shows receive publicity because of these intentional language choices.

This thesis cannot provide comprehensive coverage of everyone's opinion of queer, or of all of the existing academic literature surrounding the reclamation of queer. It will focus on the ways in which contemporary negotiations of the use of *queer* differ from early reclamation efforts which sought to unify a community. Reclamation, often used interchangeably with reappropriation, is the process of a community taking a word that was previously considered derogatory and using it as a positive term. I will use reclamation throughout this paper as a way to avoid potentially negative connotations of insensitive cultural interactions with "appropriation" efforts, and focus on the taking back aspect of "reclaiming". People use *queer* in a way that is culturally and historically informed, and I situate my research in these historical and social contexts which provide insight into current conversations.

In those conversations, I look to better understand how *queer* is currently used, both by those within the LGBTQ community and those outside of it. I challenge the common reclamation narrative that claims *queer* as a positive umbrella term by investigating the ways that people use *queer* and other terms to identify themselves and others. I also ask what it means to debate a word, who is impacted by these negotiations, and what it means for *queer* to be in the middle of reclamation efforts.

As previously stated, in the past thirty years, the function and meaning of *queer* in discourse has changed dramatically. It is used to refer to LGBTQ identities and is also an independent identity label. My first chapter aims to narrate some of *queer*'s history and frame the

contemporary conversations within their social and historical context. This section will detail the reclamation efforts that *queer* has experienced, starting in the 1990s, as well as provide a broad outline of the shifting meanings of *queer*. These different meanings range from having an umbrella term not linked to a particular gender, which is the drawback of a term such as *gay*<sup>6</sup>, to *queer* as a way subvert the heteronormative<sup>7</sup> patriarchal society that oppresses people. I address the question of what people are actually negotiating when they contest a word's use and appropriateness. Concluding the first chapter is an example of a individual's reclamation story, which serves as a glimpse into the current conversations and debates around what *queer* can do, what it means, and who should be allowed to use it.

The next chapter will demonstrate how the News on the Web (NOW) corpus data helps to illuminate the different ways publications are using *queer*. I search for how *queer* occurs with other LGBTQ identity terms and what this means for the function of *queer* in different spaces. I then move from this broad analysis to a series of specific close readings of texts from a small sample of bloggers in Chapter Three. All of these bloggers are part of the LGBTQ community. I analyze how individual authors navigate identity terminology, and what kinds of public responses to these linguistic choices exist.

These chapters culminate in the argument that in both the online news publications and the blogs, *queer* is not a simple umbrella term. The word performs a variety of functions, from bringing people into difficult conversations about respect and identity politics, to forming the

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<sup>6</sup> Gay is historically and strongly coded as a word that refers to males. Though there was a push to shift *gay* into a more inclusive realm, that mostly failed. In contemporary conversations, *gay* often continues to refer only to gay men.

<sup>7</sup> Heteronormativity is the idea that heterosexuality is the expected and preferred sexual presentation and orientation.

boundaries of who is allowed to claim what space to speak. These ideas complicate the unity of the LGBTQ community, and discuss why this matters on a scale larger than language.

## Chapter 1: *Queer*: Queering conversations about queer people for decades

The word *queer* is in the middle of the process of linguistic reclamation, which indicates that people are still actively negotiating its meaning and use. Examining the works of other scholars, I observe how people talk about their own perspectives and opinions of *queer*. I offer an explanation of why language choice matters, a definition of linguistic reclamation and its existing scholarship, and ask what the goals are in reclaiming the word *queer*. I will also provide a summary of *queer*'s history to provide context for understanding the current debates, and an example of one person's personal reclamation journey to illustrate how the negotiations around vocabulary play out in real life. Reclamation is about changing word meaning, and the process of reclamation helps to exemplify why word choice even matters.

### Does Changing Words Matter?

In 2010, a CBS and New York Times poll asked Americans if they supported gays in the military. This question was framed in two different ways. The first asked if "homosexuals" should be allowed to serve in the military, and the second asked if "gay men and lesbians" should be allowed to serve in the military. In answer to the first question about "homosexuals," 59% of respondents supported allowing this group of people to serve in the military, and 44% supported serving openly (Hechtkopf). In responding to the second question, regarding "gay men and lesbians," 70% supported serving in the military, and 58% supported serving openly. This is an 11 and 14-point difference, respectively, about a question that is asking the same thing using different words. This poll is one specific example that shows how language choice can impact people's opinions and ideas about a topic, and therefore supports the argument that the words being used matter.

Linguistic reclamation is a discipline that examines changes in words and asks what these changes mean outside the scope of language. If people who were *homosexuals* are now *gays*, the overly-medicalized and sexualized connotations are removed from the population. The entire group that is captured under *gay* then experiences different relationships with people, policies, and spaces. *Queer*, a word in the middle of reclamation, offers a unique opportunity to evaluate the initial goals of taking back the word from its derogatory use, and compare those goals to the current aspirations for the word. This term has several decades of reclamation history to evaluate, providing a rich history of how people navigate these conversations and debates. Beyond that, it is a clear example of the passion that motivates reclamation efforts. It is not that people are so adamant about the use of a particular word because that word in and of itself is valuable. Rather, people seek the potential for societal impact that lies behind word choice. If *queer* can become a positive self-identifier, then the damage it can do as a slur is diminished. If *queer* is a non-gendered umbrella term, then many people can enter into the queer community with confidence and pride. The fact that language matters beyond word shifts is paramount to the field of linguistic reclamation. Language is both indicative of current social and cultural climates, and capable of changing them.

This premise underlies efforts for nonsexist language reform. Margaret Doyle, author of the book *The A-Z of Non-Sexist Language*, focuses on how altering sexist language, such as *firemen* and *mankind*, to words such as *firefighters* and *humankind* leads to less sexist speech and actions. Words can catalyze social change, which Doyle demonstrates through polls of men, some of whom used sexist language, and some of whom used nonsexist language. There were significantly different tendencies in who displayed sexist actions between the two groups in the study, and those who used sexist language were more likely to display sexist tendencies.



Supporting this same claim, Karen Douglas, former Associate Editor for the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, found that men who dislike and don't use non-sexist language also display more hostile sexism, with statistically significant results. That means that men who use non-sexist language also display less hostile sexism. Controlling for other factors, the researchers concluded that the use of language is at least partly responsible for the difference in sexist actions (Douglas). The people who resist certain kinds of language change, often citing the rules as their motivation for objecting, forget that the language rules are constructed and fluid. Fixation on rigid language structure is done out of stubbornness, discomfort, and disagreement.

The words that people use matter and we know it. As Deborah Cameron argues in *Verbal Hygiene*, there wouldn't be such extensive debates around them if people weren't passionate about their linguistic beliefs (Cameron 27). Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, co-authors of *Language and Sexuality*, detail that a word by itself does not communicate meaning, but only through “*discourse*—the use of language in specific contexts—that words acquire meaning” (Cameron 29). The words themselves, either syllables strung together verbally or characters committed to a page, are symbolic. They only have meaning because humans have arbitrarily assigned meaning to them. Through discourse, debate, and negotiation, there becomes a collective understanding of what words represent. Active debates and negotiations about a word's meaning and use are a result of more than differences in vocabulary. Instead, “whenever people argue about words, they are also arguing about the assumptions and values that have clustered around those words in the course of their history” (Cameron 29). I specifically look into the assumptions and values assigned to *queer*, and by association, queer people. A word's history, how it is perceived and experienced by different people at different times, is an integral part of this process of changing meaning. The fact that a word can carry meaning and

information beyond its strict definition is what makes the ability to change that value so important. For *queer*, taking the formerly offensive term and claiming it as a self-identifier shifts the connotation and assumption about people who are queer from negative to positive. This is an ongoing process of linguistic reclamation that began with fervor in the early 1990s and continues today.

### The Process of Linguistic Reclamation

Linguistic reclamation is the process of a community actively taking a word that has been used against it and resisting its derogatory use by naming and using the term as a positive identifier. Reclamation efforts include debates around what a word can and should do for a population of people, and intentional discussions of the shift of meaning and use. These efforts are often conscious and deliberate. Unconscious language change occurs over time as people and societies change, and as can be expected, these shifts are not predictable or linear. Robin Brontsema, a linguist from the University of Colorado at Boulder, describes linguistic reclamation as “the appropriation of a pejorative epithet by its target(s)” (Brontsema 1). The notable aspect here is that it must be the recipients of the derogatory term who initiate and guide the reclamation. There is a small body of scholarship for linguistic reclamation, and I will be pushing against some of the claims in these writings, especially in describing the goals of reclaiming *queer*.

As a process, reclamation is often about reaching the goal of reclaiming a word that was once harmful so that “it can no longer offend or injure” (Brontsema 8). However, this is not a linear process, nor does reclamation suggest that a word is used by all people in a positive manner. Brontsema points out, “One usage does not disallow others; one group’s pejorative use

of a word does not prevent another group—indeed, its targets—from using it in new contexts and with differing intentions” (Brontsema 7). Just because some people self-identify as queer doesn’t suggest that all people accept that label, nor that it cannot still be used as an insult. With *queer* especially, reclamation also does not result in a unified meaning and use, a rare occurrence considering linguistic reclamation often is motivated by attempting to reach a singular goal. Reclamation doesn’t need to have definable success or total agreement about a word’s meaning in order to be worthwhile and productive, because the process of bringing about greater dialogue and awareness to the word is productive in and of itself.

As people work to change the meaning of a word and bring it into public dialogue, there are fluctuations in the frequency of use and appearance of a word. In-group and out-of-group individuals are navigating if a word is appropriate to use, and if so, under what circumstances. Adam Galinsky, an American social psychologist, writes that “the stigmatized group attempts to change the overall value assigned to [the slur]...this revaluing process is at the core of the reappropriation of a stigmatizing group label. By taking a negatively evaluated label, and revaluing it positively, a group can change the value of the label and thus, in at least some important ways, the value of the group” (Galinsky 228). For people in the LGBTQ community, this is a chance to influence and determine the kind of language that people use to refer to them. In-community members are able to claim authority over their own language, rather than being told by people outside of the community what terms are appropriate.

*Queer* is not firmly on one side or the other of the reclamation process. It is in the middle, in an ongoing negotiation process. As the term continues to shift and change, there is confusion around what it means, how it should be used, and who should be using it. Siobhan Somerville, author of *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American*

*Culture*, identifies some of the multiple meanings: “‘queer’ is understood as an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are ‘not straight’ ...[and it is] a term that calls into question the stability of any such categories of identity based on sexual orientation” (Somerville 203). Brontsema also offers the explanation that “To declare oneself queer is to question the social construction and regulation of sexual normalcy” (Brontsema 10). With these multiple definitions, some of which seem to be in conflict with the others, it remains ambiguous what *queer* is. Sometimes *queer* is an umbrella term for the LGBTQ community. At other times, it is an umbrella for terms related to sexuality, but not gender, hence the occurrence of the phrase “the queer and trans communities.” And in other instances, *queer* acts as a political identity that positions a person between progressive and radical ideals, and doesn’t relate to sexual orientation or gender identity at all. Brontsema also takes note of the phenomenon and states: “Far from being limited solely to positive in-group use and negative out-group use, several uses of *queer* co-exist; whether competing with each other or living together harmoniously, they show not the success of queer’s reclamation, but the myriad of possibilities it has created” (Brontsema 12). The multiplicity of the manifestations of *queer* contribute to the relationship between in-group and out-group members and what language is permissible for both. It also raises the question as to who is in-group versus not.

In 1994 Rudolph Gaudio, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Purchase College, published a paper called “Sounding Gay.” In this piece, Gaudio discusses how the term *queer* reenters the LGBTQ scene as an intentional word of resistance during the 1990s: “The term *queer* has been revived and reappropriated in recent years by lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists. It applies to all people who face societal oppression because of their sexual orientation, and its reappropriation signals a refusal by queer people to assimilate or ‘pass’ into the heterosexual

majority” (Gaudio 55). Gaudio offers in this a way to define the in-group versus the out-group in these debates. The heterosexual majority is the out-group in this discussion, delineated from people who identify within the LGBTQ community. The difference between how in-group and out-group members use language is important to note, because what may be acceptable for in-group members to use is not always appropriate for out-group. Anne Curzan, linguist at the University of Michigan, notes that particularly for out-group members, language can be intimidating because “speakers can feel uniformed, frustrated, or even angry at not being sure what is currently ‘correct’” (Curzan 115). This is not a reason or excuse to stop learning, adapting, and trying to respect the linguistic preferences of an individual or group. Rather, it is an opportune moment to engage in conversations around the stakes that accurate language has, and how to navigate discussions where both in community and out of community people are present. Identity terms are an area in which people can challenge the status quo and “question established authority about meaning and usage,” (Curzan 144). This puts the power of determining what language means in the hands of the people it effects most, and shifts the mantle of authority and expertise to those with lived experience.

A broad analysis of the reclamation of *queer* has significant representation in the small body of scholarship that comprises linguistic reclamation. However, a look into the ways in which the contestations of *queer* play out during a short period of time with a small group of people has not been extensively taken up. In this case study, I examine how people within the LGBTQ community navigate how their own vocabularies rapidly change, or not, in response to societal pressures. The bloggers I cite balance the desire for specific and accurate identity terms with the concern that too obscure and complex language will be a barrier to communication and discourage others from learning. *Queer* can be a helpful umbrella term that includes rather than

excludes people and is accessible for folks who are less familiar with the multitude of LGBTQ identity terms. The unification of the LGBTQ community under the heading of “queer community” is problematic, however, because it undermines and erases certain identities, and suggests a unification of ideas and beliefs which is also untrue. It is important to ask both what can be gained from using the word *queer*, and what might be lost in that process.

Many scholars, including Brontsema, Curzan, and Galinsky, have stated that the major goals of reclaiming the word *queer* include taking the term back from the derogatory associations, and forming a collaborative community that can resist heteronormative oppressions. Based on my own findings, I argue that in the time that *queer* has been experiencing reclamation efforts, the goals have changed. Now, it is not only predominately socially acceptable to be queer, it is often seen as a favorable and progressive identity. Bringing *queer* out from the realm of slurs is no longer the primary focus of the reclamation efforts. Defining what *queer* is and who is permitted to claim the identity, is the contemporary debate.

Language and word choices affect people and their daily lives. Arguing about semantics is also about advocating for recognition and affirmation which may be otherwise erased. How people speak about labels, themselves, and others affect opinions and ideologies. Over time, change in perception and ideology can manifest in observable, quantifiable social progress. In forming cohesive groups and establishing feelings of solidarity, conscious decisions about language is often a cornerstone. Beyond influencing people’s ideas, word choice can make a statement. When people use the term *gay* instead of *homosexual*, the identity changes from a medicalized term to a social one. Similarly, with the word *queer*, the word has shifted in meaning, and the people who tend to use it differently than thirty years ago. When it was used as a derogatory word, it was often synonymous with *gay*, and indicated non-normative sexuality

and undesirable gender expression and presentation. The goal of reclaiming the term was to disrupt the existing identity categories and replace them with a term that intended to avoid gendered connotations and language rooted in binary oppositions. While this complete replacement has not occurred, the word *queer* is generally becoming more commonly used. After a sharp decline in the appearance of *queer* in the 1960s to 1980s, as *queer* became recognized as a contested term and people's discomfort with the word is evident, the deliberate reclamation effort in the 1990s begin to increase the frequency of appearance (see Figure 1), both within the LGBTQ community and for people outside of it. As can be seen in Figure 2, this is not a completely linear process, but it emphasizes that with increasing usage, the word is all the more important to understand. Resistance to this change, pushing back by citing *queer*'s hurtful history, its lack of clarity, or its offensiveness to older LGBTQ community members<sup>8</sup>, provides information about people's beliefs, experiences, ideals, and goals. Thus, language conveys information about the people who use it. Selecting one identity term over another, be it *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *queer*, *trans*, etc. is a political statement as well as a personal one.

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<sup>8</sup> A common narrative is that older LGBTQ community members do not like the word *queer*; however, this is not supported by the data I collected for this paper.

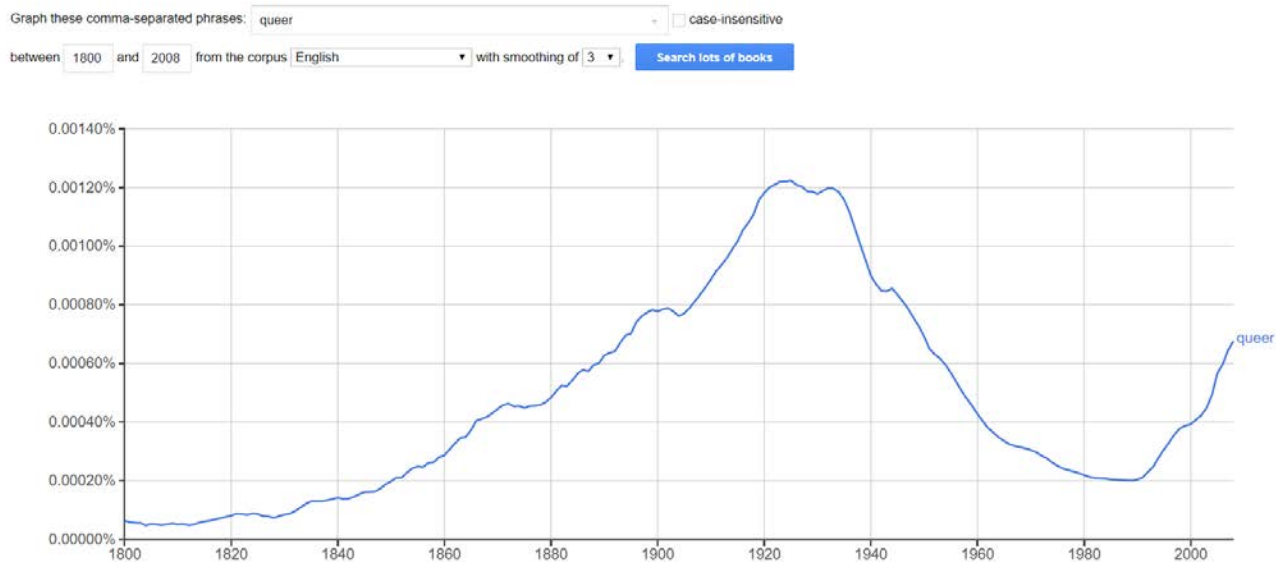


Figure 1: Google Books Ngram Viewer of *queer*<sup>9</sup>

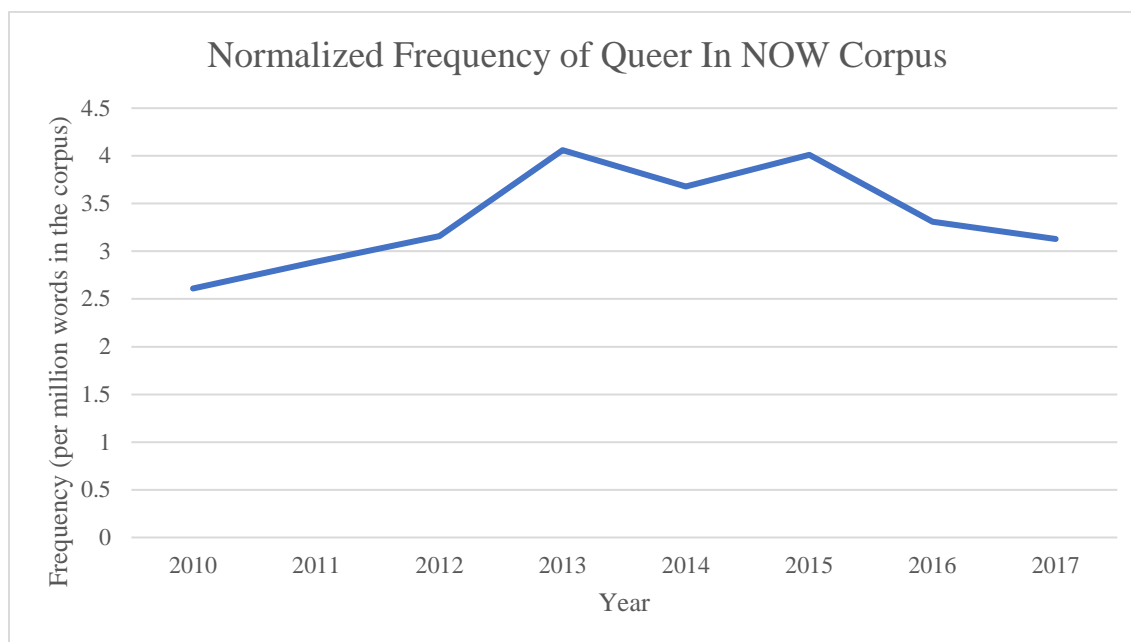


Figure 2: Normalized frequencies of *queer* in the NOW Corpus, 2010-2017

<sup>9</sup> Google Ngram viewer depicts how a word or phrase has appeared in corpus of books. The most recent year that this search can include is 2008.



## Queer Theory

Queer theory as an academic discipline is a fluid and changeable field, much as the word *queer* itself is. Numerous definitions abound, but David Halperin, American theorist of gender studies, notes that the moniker first was coined as a joke:

Teresa de Lauretis coined the phrase “queer theory” to serve as the title of a conference that she held in February of 1990...She had heard the word “queer” being tossed about in a gay-affirmative sense by activists, street kids, and members of the art world in New York during the late 1980s...In her opening remarks at the conference, Professor de Lauretis acknowledged that she ... wanted specifically to unsettle the complacency of “lesbian and gay studies” (that “by now established and often convenient formula,” as she called it) which implied that the relation of lesbian to gay male topics in this emerging field was equitable, perfectly balanced, and completely understood—as if everyone knew exactly how lesbian studies and gay male studies connected to each other and why it was necessary or important that they should evolve together. (Halperin 340)

This unconventional decision was an active choice to challenge gay assimilationist ideals, and identify the power imbalance between *gay* and *lesbian*, which doesn’t even begin to address other queer community terms. In 2003, Halperin also writes on the word *queer* itself, “[e]ven to define queer, we now think, is to limit its potential, its magical power to usher in a new age of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities” (Halperin 339). Part of the power *queer* holds is then exactly to remain ambiguous to continue to spur radical conversations.

Queer theory is an example of people inside the academy buying into the simple narrative of reclamation efforts. While this discipline has delved into identity and social impact, it hasn’t reflexively studies the history of the word *queer*. This results in a narrative that states the reclamation of *queer* is the process of taking the word back from a slur and establishing it as a positive, community identifier. In the 1990s, during the initial reclamation efforts which were about unifying a community, this narrative was true. However, the current debate does not follow the same pattern, as will be discussed in later chapters.

The importance of queer theory, in expanding the populations that it can critically engage with beyond those of gay and lesbian studies, is that queer theory “achieved...the entry of queer scholarship into the academy, the creation of jobs in queer studies, and the acquisition of academic respectability for queer work” (Halperin 340). Gust Yep, author of “The Dialectics of Intervention: Toward a Reconceptualization of the Theory/Activism Divide in Communication Scholarship and Beyond,” claims that “queer theory offers ways to imagine different social realities, gender/sexual sections, and participation in cultural politics” (Yep 2). Heiko Motschenbacher, author of *Language, Gender and Sexual Identity: Poststructuralist Perspectives*, argues that queer theory also relies upon the belief that “speakers are not thought to possess identities that are merely reflected in language use, but to construct identities through language use, often in a fluid and temporary manner” (Motschenbacher 522). The linguistic choice to identify the field with the word *queer*, and to perpetuate that naming protocol, demonstrates the mutual construction of identity and language. Another interpretation of queer theory, that is “to queer- to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize, to camp up- heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialites that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them.” (Sullivan vi) In this case, queer theory exists to challenge the heteronormative structures which form the basis of many societal assumptions. As Motschenbacher continues to explain:

One major motivation for this interest [of queering theory] lies in the fact that an exclusive focus on the linguistic construction of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues would imply that heterosexual identities and desires are less a matter of discursive construction (which is clearly not the case; Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 59). An uncritical concentration of research on LGBT would, therefore, reinscribe the view that heterosexuality is the tacitly assumed default sexuality and that other sexualities are marked (see also Hall, 2003). (Motschenbacher 523)

By emphasizing that heterosexuality is just as constructed as queer sexualities, queer theory decentralizes the hegemony of heterosexuality.

Pairing queer theory with linguistic analysis, especially in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, “a cover term for largely qualitative, top–down approaches to discourse that are of interest to Queer Linguistics” (Motschenbacher 529), it is possible to analyze how linguistic choices and patterns have social effects. Those social effects are examined by William Leap, founding co-editor of the Journal of Language and Sexuality. Leap writes that “queer linguistics explores the processes through which messages about sexuality come to be associated – or gain an appearance of association – with particular forms of discursive practice” (Leap 663). Leap is in conversation with Cameron, Motschenbacher, and Halperin, drawing on their scholarship to define the parameters how language impacts social formations and how people choose to group themselves. In particular, Leap outlines the constantly changing nature of language and theory, stating that “a queer linguistic critique of sexuality and normativity demonstrates that authority and hierarchy are not static, predetermined formations, but are deeply embedded within and indebted to historical and social contexts” (Leap 664). Past and present social ideals impact the ways in which words are defined, understood, and used. Leap summarizes the argument from Cameron and Kulick that proposes “that studies of language and sexuality ‘encompass not only sexual identity but [also] ... fantasy, repression, pleasure, fear and the unconscious.’ In effect, this proposal suggests that studies of language and desire become the anchoring theme for queer linguistics (Kulick 2003)” (Leap 662). The link between language and sexuality is clear and is central to queer theory. Language speaks to people’s fears, doubts, fantasies, pleasures, and unconscious biases. Examining the language used allows examination of those aspects of an individual and a cultural as well.

Queer theorists have often focused on speech and the patterns that can be observed in verbal exchange. I enter into some of the same questions, particularly around the range of identities that *queer* suggests, but coming at them from investigations of written pieces. Looking at how words can be actively altered over time is one of the purviews of linguistic reclamation.

### *Queer*, A Historical Snapshot

Linguistically, *queer* has been an adjective, verb, and noun and currently is used in all three forms. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the word meant ‘odd’, ‘strange’, ‘bad’, or ‘counterfeit’ (Somerville 204). Sometime during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *queer* came to refer to sexual practices in the U.S. and along with that it became a way to qualify a person or practice as abnormal. Particularly in New York City, men who had a sexual interest in other men called themselves queer. In the 1940s, the word became used in mainstream U.S. vocabulary as a derogatory label for same-sex relationships and practices. Expanding on this, the changing connotations of *queer* in mid-twentieth century America are described by George Chauncey, Yale history professor. Before that time, *queer* mostly denoted “abnormal” displays of male fashion, gender presentation, or habits. A man who took care of his physical appearance and worked at home would be considered queer, no matter whom he had sex with. In addition, the terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* were not commonly used as ways to separate out groups of people. Starting in the middle of the century, *queer* became a more coded term for sexual activities, including those that were considered perverse, degenerate, or between people of the same sex. Thus, *queer* was put in opposition of ‘normal’, and one of the markers of a ‘normal’ American man was his display of masculinity and heterosexual practices.

Along with acquiring sexual connotations, during the twentieth century *queer* moved to express racial discrimination as well. Especially in New York, where much of gay and queer culture was centered, popularized, and publicized at the time, any person who was not white could also be 'queer' (Chauncey). Possessing any kind of marginalized identity-- race, class, gender, ability status, etc.-- meant that a person could be labeled as queer. As the decades passed, the word became more and more specialized for gender presentation and sexual practice, and the other meanings became less commonly used.

Starting in the 1980s, *queer* began to change in both political and academic settings, linked significantly to AIDS activism. Those on the margins of society banded together to strengthen ties strained by poverty and AIDS. Marlon Bailey, 2015 winner of the Alan Bray Memorial Book Prize for his book *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, has published about his experiences as a queer black man in Detroit in the 1980s. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of language and how it signaled community bonds and ties. Bailey writes, "My friends and I...all *queer* in the full sense of the term- called ourselves 'The Family,' and because of this, we inherited the residual *faggots*, *sissy*, *dyke*, and *freak* markings" (Bailey vii). Identifying as queer changed the way in which Bailey and his community formed relationships; they were able to look past identities of race, class, and ability and focus on the ways in which people's queer identities gave them shared experiences of oppression. Everyone, the "*faggots*, *siss[ies]*, *dyke[s]*, and *freak[s]*" were all *queer*, and so could form solidarity around that identity. In this circumstance, *queer* addresses the people outside of mainstream societal norms, expanding the possibilities of the people included under the label. It should be noted that people within the LGBTQ community were making the decisions surrounding group identity. In-community reclamation efforts are examples of self-determination

of identity. Galinsky summarizes to the power of in-community members reclaiming this word by writing,

The historically negative connotations of the label are challenged by the proud, positive connotations implied by a group's use of the term as a self-label. Where "queer" had connoted undesirable abnormality, by the fact that it is used by the group to refer to itself, it comes to connote pride in the groups' unique characteristics. Where before it referred to despised distinctiveness, it now refers to celebrated distinctiveness. Reappropriation allows the label's seemingly stable meaning to be open to negotiation. (Galinsky 231)

The community has the ability to take power away from the dominant population by refusing to consider their slurs as derogatory. If *queer* is no longer a negative label, as Galinsky explains "it [is] more difficult for out-group members to gain recognition for their own display of superiority, thereby undermining one of the functions of prejudice (Fein & Spencer, 1997). [This is] the ability of reappropriation to deprive outgroup members of a linguistic weapon" (Galinsky 232).

In 1990, Queer Nation dropped a pamphlet "Queers Read This" on the audience of a New York Pride Parade. This document called for all members of the LGBTQ community to use the word *queer* to resist the cisgender, heterosexual majority. "Queers Read This" describes the relationship between theory and activism, academia and action, and how language matters in each of these areas. The pamphlet demands the use of *queer* to resist gay assimilation to heterosexual norms. The text includes bold statements such as "straight people have a privilege that allows them to do whatever they please...they live a life free of fear." This rift and divide is emphasized throughout the text, which urges queer people to be angry, and to use that rage to challenge the hegemonic power that straight people claim. Anger, visibility, non-conformity, and pain are repeated themes. The only way, according to the pamphlet, to change this narrative is to stop being compliant with the wishes and expectations of non-queer people. This is not guaranteed to work; indeed "there is the one certainty in the politics of power: those left out of it

beg for inclusion, while the insiders claim that they already are.” The text lists many action items for how queer people can exert their right to be included and present, and how to remain strong in the face of resistance and adversity.

*Queer* disrupts popular gay and lesbian essentialism, the idea that the greatest achievement would be to have the same rights and respect as straight people, and challenges specific labels by embracing ambiguity. By rejecting the standard and inflexible classification of gender and sexuality, “Queers Read This” offers anti-assimilationist rhetoric that positions straight people as opposite and against queer people, not as the ideal to strive for. The only way, according to the pamphlet, to challenge the hegemonic power of straight people is to stop being compliant with the wishes and expectations of non-queer people. Of particular importance in this context is the explicit conversation about why the word *queer* has more power to accomplish this than the term *gay*. “Queer! Ah, do we really have to use that word? It's trouble. For some it means strange and eccentric and kind of mysterious. That's okay; we like that. But some gay girls and boys don't. They think they're more normal than strange. And for others ‘queer’ conjures up those awful memories of adolescent suffering.” There are multiple and varied meanings of *queer*, and there continues to be a debate around its use. But according to this text, “using ‘queer’ is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world” (Anonymous, n.p.). *Queer* is serving as a term of resistance, of blatant disregard for the expectations of straight society. It is not ignored that at the same time, “...**queer** can be a rough word, but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him” (Anonymous, n.p.). Ultimately the word pleads for people to come together because strength in numbers is a form of protection. The

authors want *queer* to be a unifying term, more so than *gay*, especially because “Queer, unlike **gay**, doesn't mean **male**” (Anonymous, n.p.).

When people argue about the effectiveness of *queer* as an umbrella term or individual identity label, one of the aspects that arises is that of recognition. To be seen, understood, and embraced in a community often means that precision of language and mutual understanding of words is necessary. *Queer* intentionally and inherently avoids specificity, but this can lead to a lack of understanding and strained communication. This disconnect often breeds animosity, both in and out of community, which in turn intensifies the debate and creates rifts between people. Language is the instigator of conflict, but what is involved and at stake in the conversation is far more than just words.

#### A Contemporary, Personal Reclamation Story

Highlighting the contemporary nature of reclamation the ongoing debate around *queer* is Jamie Satcher, a gay man who grew up in Mississippi and suffered repeated bullying and abuse, which included being on the receiving end of shouts of ‘queer’ hurled out of the windows of passing cars. The title of his post, “Reckon He’s Queer?”, is explained as something that Satcher heard again and again throughout his life: from coworkers, students, friends, and family. Satcher says that he was constantly judged about his appearance, his walk and posture, his isolation, and he experienced all of “that judgement [in] one word: queer.” More than twenty-five years after the publication of “Queers Read This” which called for *queer* to subvert the power of a heterosexual, patriarchal society, Satcher continues to grapple with the term’s presence in his life. He was estranged from his family because of his sexuality, and he was told he deserved to



die because he was queer. Throughout his life, this word was intentionally used to cause pain and exclude him from places and groups. His resistance to *queer* is more than understandable.

Satcher speaks to the multitude of feelings he had during the 1980s and 1990s when he moved through the world as a self-proclaimed straight white man. Internally, he identified as gay and struggled to understand how the AIDS epidemic was seen as a productive purge by the straight people around him. He remained closeted and performed the expected social functions of getting married and having kids as a way to solidify his place in the straight mainstream. Satcher says that he suppressed his same-sex attractions and urges through the use of alcohol and narcotics, while remaining a fully functioning academic, husband, and father. Throughout his career as a college professor, he saw the growing gay and lesbian advocacy that students brought to the campus around him, even in Alabama, part of “the Bible Belt south.” He says that he began to research gay and lesbian advocacy and contribute papers and speeches and conferences which addressed social justice in the queer community. And yes, Satcher himself uses the phrase “the queer community.”

Satcher goes on to say that his boyfriend, now husband, had such a radically different experience growing up as a gay man, and that this alternative perspective helped him to heal from his own traumatic experiences. Within this relationship, he found acceptance in himself and also in a broader community of people who affirmed rather than oppressed him. In the final paragraph of the piece, Satcher uses phrases such as “like all the queer people I know” and “for those of us who are queer,” which identifies both himself and others as queer. He explains this shift: “I have found empowerment and self-acceptance in being queer. Queer as a pejorative has no power over me. Now, my response to ‘Reckon he’s queer?’ is ‘Yes, absolutely!’” This ringing endorsement comes from a person who only lines earlier described the pain and lasting hurt

caused by *queer*. Although Satcher does not fully describe the process of his linguistic transition in this post, his position has drastically changed over the course of his lifetime. Part of this can be contributed to the changing climate around the acceptance and affirmation of queer folks, but that is not all of it. Specific positive experiences or exposures to the word *queer* as an identity to embrace must have occurred to convince Satcher to reevaluate *queer* after a lifetime of hearing it only as a slur. Though his perspective and experiences are uniquely his own, there are commonalities shared with a variety of other people's stories. As a white gay man, Satcher represents the part of the LGBTQ community that has been most thoroughly surveyed and researched, particularly in regard to the use of *queer*, and whose voices are most often centered. This offers a framework for the conversations I detail later, which suggest that subsets of the community have different ways of engaging with and debating this word. None are representative, but the conversations offer ways to understand how people navigate negotiating the process and goals of reclamation.

## Chapter 2: Let's Talk about Now, using NOW (News On the Web) Corpus Data

Though *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *queer* as “an umbrella term that includes gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people,” the word is not always used in this way. Using corpus-based data, this chapter will show, using numerical data, that *queer* functions differently than *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, *trans*, and all of those together. As shown below, *queer* only sometimes serves as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ community, and this raises the questions of what *queer* means in varying contexts, what the implications are of using it, and if *queer* is able to be used to refer to a unified community.

### NOW Corpus Overview

Online corpora allow researchers to track language use and collect systematic data about words and patterns, in both written and spoken language in different registers or genres, as well as over time. News on the Web (NOW) is a database that collects online news publications, magazines, and articles from 2010 to the present. I chose this corpus because of the ability to closely analyze contemporary information and popular culture publications, which provide a unique perspective on the current linguistic debates. The NOW corpus contains 5.7 billion words of data, and this number grows by about 5 million words everyday. This daily expansion means that every day, there is a possibility of new entries that affect the numbers for a study like this one. To account for this and stabilize the data I worked with, I set the collection parameters from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2017. I included only publications from the United States, because linguistic choices are culturally influenced and I wished to focus on the national area that I am most familiar with. Searching for just the word *queer* results in more than 16,000 hits, which is more than can realistically be analyzed qualitatively. Rather than use part of speech to

narrow the results, which other scholars have done in the past, I opted to use collocates to refine my searches. Collocates are words that appear on either side of a central search term, in this case always *queer*. I searched up to four words<sup>10</sup> on either side, excluding articles and other common function words so that I prevented *and*, *the*, *or*, etc. from being the most frequently seen collocates. This seemed a promising way to approach the research questions, because the collocates allow me to search for how other words in *queer*'s lexical field, including *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, and *trans*, co-occur with the term. In total, for all of the acronym terms<sup>11</sup> combined, this yielded several hundred results. I sorted through this data set to determine how often each LGBT acronym term appeared close to the word *queer*, and within this, what meaning of *queer* was employed in each instance. The findings are detailed in Table 1 below. *Transgender* and *trans* had significantly different results, both in terms of what publications tended to use each term, and how *transgender* or *trans* intersected and interacted with *queer*, which is why both terms are included.

The table below represents a summary of the corpus-based data. For each collocate, I noted how many entries total there were in the database, what percentage of those occurrences are the LGBTQ acronym list<sup>12</sup>, the year in which the collocate occurs the most<sup>13</sup>, and what the total rank of the word is on the full collocate list.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This is the default number of words on either side of the central search term when finding collocates in the NOW corpus.

<sup>11</sup> I will refer to this series of letters and the corresponding terms (*lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, *queer*) also as just “the acronym” or “the acronym list.”

<sup>12</sup> That is, how many of these appearances are the series “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.”

<sup>13</sup> Notably, the data for 2017 does not include the last two months of the year.

<sup>14</sup> That is, out of every collocate, including words which are not in the LGBTQ acronym, the rank of the word in the list.

Table 1: NOW Corpus Collocate Data

Collocate	Number of Total Occurrences	Percentage that is the acronym list	Year with the Greatest Number of Occurrences	Total Rank on Collocate Frequency List
Lesbian	18	22%	2015, 2017 (4 occurrences each)	45th
Gay	58	5%	2014	19th
Bisexual	82	90%	2017	9th
Transgender	144	65%	2016, 2017 (42 occurrences each)	4 <sup>th</sup>
Trans	126	2%	2016	6th

### Top Ten Collocates

One of the features of the NOW corpus is the ability to see a list of the top most frequently occurring collocates for a word. I was able to exclude articles and other function words and use this list as a guide for what content words are often appearing around *queer*. The top ten words, in order from greatest number of occurrences to least, are *women*, *community*, *color*, *transgender*, *black*, *trans*, *folk*, *woman*, *bisexual*, *straight*. *Transgender*, *trans*, and *bisexual* are all part of the LGBTQ acronym and discussed further later in this chapter. *Folk* appears almost exclusively in references to the television show “Queer as Folk,” such as the NPR article that writes “The creator of the 1999 BBC series *Queer As Folk* has made three new

TV series about gay men and women.”<sup>15</sup> *Straight* appears as a direct contrast and supposedly opposite to *queer*, such as “[i]n queer spaces, straight people are guests and only partially welcome,”<sup>16</sup> or in cases such as *The Inquisitor*’s discussion of the “feel-good makeover magic of *Queer Eye For the Straight Guy*,” which references the television show “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.”<sup>17</sup> *Community* is most often seen as part of the phrase “the queer community,” and the *Chicago Tribune* showcases this with the discussion of pride parades serving as “a home for the voices and the stories of the queer community, as well as providing information on queer topics and culture.”<sup>18</sup> *Women/woman, color, and black* are all connected and occur primarily with one another and with *queer*. These articles are often discussing queer women of color, including their representation in media. The show “Take My Wife” depicts “queer women of color sharing scenes together (a *very* rare sight).”<sup>19</sup> After the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, conversations arose about how black and queer people face distinct legal and social discrimination and oppression. Aurielle Marie of NBC News writes, “as a young, Black, queer woman...I learned quickly that no one was interested in our suffering, but us,”<sup>20</sup> and these identities intersect and affect each other, “watch[ing] characters constantly consider the costs and benefits of their work and the effects it has on their personal lives and mental states... forces women to negotiate their role as black queer women activists.”<sup>21</sup> It is also interesting that the

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2015/04/01/396809966/from-banana-to-cucumber-new-series-spans-the-spectrum-of-sex>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.advocate.com/sexy-beast/2016/6/29/34-public-displays-affection-straight-people-take-granted>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.inquisitr.com/3004906/andy-cohen-bravos-king-of-the-klatsch-still-rules-some-of-tvs-rowdiest-chat/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-pride-parade-preview-20170618-story.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/08/take-my-wife-season-2-new-home>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/oped-pepsi-systemic-violence-capitalism-n743166>

<sup>21</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/144383/humans-ferguson-missouri>

combination of *women/woman* and *queer* together are so prevalent, but that neither *men* or *man* is in the top one hundred collocates.

*Queer* is serving as a modifier for a particular gender category, as it is not appearing even near *man/men* often enough to be considered a common occurrence. I suggest that one of the reasons for this is that many men who would fall under the *queer men* category instead use *gay*. *Gay* is a word that despite reclamation efforts and attempts to establish the word as an inclusive term, it remains firmly entrenched as a male term. Though some people use “gay women” and “lesbians” interchangeably, neither is as common as the stand-alone *gay* for men. *Gay* is the eighteenth most common collocate; *lesbian* is the forty-ninth. Beyond that, *queer* allows for a fluidity that is more socially acceptable for women<sup>22</sup> to embrace than for men.

#### Everything Under the *Queer* Umbrella (or not)

Various dictionary entries suggest that *queer* is an umbrella term for a range of sexual orientation and gender identity terms. The fact that *queer* is part of an acronym, LGBTQ, that includes sexual orientation and gender identity terms seems almost inherently contradictory then. References to “the queer community” are seen throughout these online publications. *Queer* is used by publications of various origin, some LGBTQ focused and others not, as a respectable term that encompasses a range of identities, perhaps even beyond what LGBTQ captures. For some people, queer acknowledges the labels that are not included in standard acronyms, such as pansexual<sup>23</sup>, asexual, polyamorous<sup>24</sup>, nonbinary, etc. For example, a Reddit contributor writes:

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<sup>22</sup> I use *women* to refer to all people who identify themselves as such, regardless of sex assigned at birth or gender presentation.

<sup>23</sup>[https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/evr1d/i\\_am\\_queer\\_in\\_three\\_ways\\_pansexual\\_polyamorous/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/evr1d/i_am_queer_in_three_ways_pansexual_polyamorous/)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/relationships/polyamorous-pansexual>

I often identify as 'queer' because it captures [the pansexual, polyamorous, and genderqueer] aspects of my identity without my having to go into detail about them all (from my perspective, the term queer is useful as a blanket term for all non-'standard' sexual orientations, gender identities/expressions, or relationship orientations/lifestyles. Others might disagree). It can get a little bit tiresome explaining them to people, and they are still left with misconceptions/stereotypes afterwards. (pan\_poly\_epicene)

Another example that shows queer used as a convenient way to capture identity terms outside of LGBT is when Gaby Dunn, an author for Women's Health Magazine, comments on the challenges of being sexually fluid and relays the anecdote "Just this weekend, a friend said, 'Isn't it great we're all gay?' And then looked at me and said, 'kind of.' It hurt. It hurt because it's the erasure of the very real fluidity of sexuality that a lot of queer people experience. ... If I shout from the rooftops about being queer, people will have to get it, right?"

As an umbrella term, queer allows for the greatest number of people to be included and welcomed into a space. This brings strength in numbers as well as in diversity of perspective and experience. The more people present and passionate about advocating for 'queer justice', the greater the chance of success.

*Queer* is also used by people outside of the community who are less familiar with the specificities of identity terms. Rather than having to grapple with challenging and confusing vocabulary, they are able to embrace the word *queer* as an umbrella term. The importance of having an accessible, catch-all term lies in its ability to bring people into conversations, rather than pushing them out due to linguistic barriers. As an umbrella term, *queer* triggers certain connotations and connections in people's mind, both positive and negative. On one hand, the phrase "the queer community" can erase people's difference and put everyone's experiences under the same, unifying heading, but there is a productive side to this too. Having *queer* spaces



or conversations centers the voices and needs of people who otherwise are overlooked or invisible in mainstream society.

In the introduction, I explained that my choice to use the acronym LGBTQ was a personal decision based on my familiarity and comfort with this configuration. This acronym was found frequently in the NOW corpus, often preceded or followed by spelling out what each of the letters stands for. For example, an article from *The Birmingham Times* reads: “Many of those killed were people of color, prompting some to discuss the treatment of minorities in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community.”<sup>25</sup> Within this format, *queer* is never serving as an umbrella, because it is always connected to other community identity terms. What does *queer* in this context mean? The fact that *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transgender* are already included suggests that *queer* means something different than all of those. Perhaps *queer* is less specific, allowing for fluidity, flexibility, and ambiguity. *Queer* disrupts the binary thinking of *straight* versus *gay* and *man* versus *woman*. *Queer* challenges the linguistic certainty of identity terms, including *lesbian*<sup>26</sup> and *bisexual*<sup>27</sup>, precisely because there is no singular definition.

I suggest that *queer* continues to serve as a term that resists both the heteronormative patriarchal ideals and the word *gay*, which centers male voices to the extent of excluding others. It is also a word that is used to speak to intersectional identities and oppressions. *Queer* appears frequently with the words *women* and *black* (both of which are in the top ten most frequent collocates). *Queer* is unlike the identity terms of *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual*. Sometimes, it

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.birminghamtimes.com/2017/02/thousands-of-demonstrators-from-all-races-and-ages-turned-out-for-these-marches-in-birmingham/>

<sup>26</sup> Traditionally defined as women who are attracted to other women.

<sup>27</sup> Often defined as attraction to multiple genders, or as attraction to one’s own gender and people of other genders.

captures all three, and in these instances, *queer* is put into conversation with *trans* as a distinct and separate identity category. *Trans* and *queer* both include various, more specific, labels underneath their broad category classification. The primary difference between *trans* and *queer* then is the length of time they have been present in linguistic negotiations. *Queer* has been experiencing reclamation efforts for decades now, while *trans* and *transgender* are both relatively new terms that have yet to have the kind of contentious history that is evident with *queer*. At the same time that *queer* is clearly not functioning as an umbrella term in these circumstances, in other situations, it is.

#### Everything Under the *Queer* Half-Umbrella (sometimes)

*Gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* are the terms in the LGBTQ acronym that refer to sexual orientation. When the phrase “queer and trans communities,” which appears often, is used, the suggestion is that *trans* is somehow outside of *queer*, where *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* live. Even within this smaller umbrella, there are identities which are erased and ignored. *Gay* is still the part of the community which is most highly publicized and the focus of media representation. While *man/men* did not appear in the top one hundred collocates of *queer*, both are in the top ten collocates of *gay*. When *gay* and *queer* are paired together, which happens with some frequency, *gay* is removed from the rest of the community. *Gay* has historically been seen as the elite and most privileged identity in the LGBTQ community, particularly white gay men, and *queer* is a word that undermines that hierarchy by avoiding a male-dominated word.

*Lesbian* is the least common collocate that is present among the terms in the LGBTQ acronym. Of the eighteen occurrences over the period of seven years, some of these are explaining the acronym, not engaging in conversations about *lesbian* and *queer* identities

interacting. It seems that online news articles are simply not addressing the relationship between *lesbian* identities and *queer* identities, and how these may sometimes be the same thing and at other times are clearly not. The historical importance of the term *lesbian* is linked to separating out the community from *gay*, which was and still remains a dominantly male term. Bringing attention to lesbian meant acknowledging their experiences as unique. Addressing lesbian concerns and needs could not simply be lumped in with addressing gay men.

The word *lesbian* is much less common in discourse in general, and it prompts me to ask ‘why?’. *Gay* is not avoided in either verbal or written forms, and it is a frequently occurring collocate with *queer*. Why is *lesbian* different than both *gay* and *bisexual* in this case? One possible explanation is that *queer women* is a frequently used phrase that encompasses *lesbian* identities, and *queer women* avoids the highly sexualized political and social connotations that *lesbian* holds. The phrase *queer men* is not seen or heard often, as *gay* is still a shorter and more common reference. *Queer* serves as an alternative to *lesbian* more frequently than it serves as an alternative for *gay*, and the gendered difference is furthered supported by examining the collocates *woman/women* and *man/men*.

*Bisexual* is an identity term that is also experiencing recent negotiations. For some people, the word operates in a strictly binary sense, attracted to men and women. However, there is some debate around this, because *bisexual* was originally defined as attraction to your own gender and other genders. This opens up the word to be expansive and inclusive of transgender and nonbinary identities. In whatever way *bisexual* is used though, it is a term that holds stigma both in and outside of the queer community. *Bisexual* folks are sometimes accused by the rest of the queer community of being “not gay enough” when in a relationship with someone of a different gender than themselves, or of using *bisexual* as “a stop on the way to gay town”

(Sherouse). On the other hand, *bisexual* is seen as a phase or time of exploration by straight people, or it is seen as a gay person lying in order to seem more acceptable and respectable. When in a relationship with someone of a different gender than herself, Kylie Sparks, a self-identified bi person writes in her article “Too Queer for Straight Spaces and Too Straight for Queer Spaces”: “[i]n straight spaces, my sexuality almost never gets mentioned unless I correct someone” (Sparks). This contributes to the erasure of bisexual people, which permeates into many

Bisexually identified people comprise almost half of the LGBTQ community (Campaign), making bisexual people the single largest group in the community, and yet there remains a stigma around the orientation from both outside and inside of the LGBTQ community. In a U.S. national study, it was found that “all participants’ attitudes were generally more positive toward bisexual women than bisexual men” (Dodge, Abstract). Due to this stigma, bisexual people face marginalization and erasure, contributing to the fact that only 9% of the co-occurrences of *queer* and *bisexual* are something other than the acronym explanation. aspects of society. Sexually fluid and bisexual men withhold their sexual identity from healthcare providers more than any other LGBTQ group (Campaign). This means that bisexual men are often undertested for HIV and consequently affected at higher rates. The aversion to talking about bisexuality in general causes a significant difference in the number of occurrences of *bisexual* and *queer* together in critical conversations.

Bisexual occurs much more frequently than lesbian and also more frequently than gay, but this doesn’t actually mean that people are talking about bisexual and queer identities. Instead, more than 90% of the entries are the list or a modified list of words from the LGBTQ acronym. This is important to name because only examining the frequency of a combination of words does

not reveal the entire story. From this set of data, it becomes clear that both lesbian and bisexual are labels that don't often have critical conversations in and around the word queer. Neither identity term has significant space devoted to the ways in which queerness and the queer community intersects with, complicates, or supports lesbian and bisexual people. The publications are not speaking to how bisexual folks are a huge part of the queer community, or how biphobia runs rampant both within and outside of the LGBTQ community. Bisexual people often don't have their needs met because bisexuality is regarded as an excuse to be sexually promiscuous, a phase, or just an excuse to not be gay, or not be straight. It is cool now to be queer<sup>28</sup>, and some queer people believe that bisexual people are just trying to access the social standing of queer folks without "committing" to it. Charlie Mitchell, author for the online magazine *Beyond the Binary*, begins the article "Being Queer is Cool" with the disclaimer "Throughout this piece I use gay and queer as umbrella terms for the whole LGBTQIA+ community." *Gay, queer*, and an extended acronym are interestingly all synonymous in this piece. Mitchell goes on to write:

I've been told recently that all these gay and transgender people are only around and in the media because it's cool. This is obviously a ridiculous statement to many in the queer community, we've existed as long as there have been people and been persecuted for much of that time, but I also put to you – why would it be bad if being gay was cool?...I can ask questions and learn from others, and people are interested in my stories just as I am interested in theirs, because it's 'cool'. In this community, once again, being gay is cool. (Mitchell)

If being *queer* is cool, what fractures arise from people within the community who are either excited about this turn, or resistant to the supposed commodification of identity?

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<sup>28</sup> <http://beyondthebinary.co.uk/being-queer-is-cool/>

Outside the Umbrella (sometimes): *Transgender* and *Trans*

*Transgender* and *trans*, as collocates of *queer*, pattern in strikingly different ways. The majority of the occurrences of *transgender* and *queer* together are in the form of describing the LGBTQ acronym, “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.” These appearances do not actively discuss the ways that *queer* and *transgender* interact in discourse or how the identities either overlap or are distinct. In contrast, most of the appearances of *trans* as a collocate to *queer* are something other than explaining the acronym.

*Transgender* and *trans* are the two words from the LGBTQ acronym that have the highest rank in the collocate list. In searching through the publications, it is common to see *transgender* as an entry in the acronym list, and *trans* appearing in the phrase “the queer and trans communities.” In the case of latter wording, *queer* encompasses sexual identities, and *transgender* and *trans* are separate from this. This could be due to the split between sexual orientation and gender identity terms: *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* all refer to sexual orientation while *transgender* and *trans* refer to gender identity. But there also seems to be more to the phenomenon.

As *queer* is used to group certain identities together, at least some of the time, it simultaneously pushes *trans* out of the collective. Transgender individuals experience different kinds and degrees of discrimination, both legally and socially, than people who experience oppression based on sexual orientation. This separation of terms begs the question: does what we see in language suggest that *queer* can actually refer to a unified community? Is there enough unity and shared experience to bring these identities and group under one heading? Are there simply too many points of separation to refer to this diverse group of people under one moniker? There are advantages to one community-- strength in numbers and sharing privileges and

resources-- but there is a risk that already marginalized voices (people of color, disabled folks, trans identified persons) may be further erased and discounted. Often, the LGBTQ community is criticized as a place where the white, able-bodied, neurotypical people benefit at the expense of everyone else. Much like other groups where privileged voices are the ones that people hear, “the modern [LGBT] movement often ignores many queer identities including transgendered and transsexual individuals, people who express a genderqueer identity, the radically queer, queers of color, queers who do not identify with these particular sexualities, and queers who are either homeless, of lower socio-economic status, old, and/or disabled” (Ferry 106). The word *queer* in this quote goes beyond identifying a sexual or gender identity. It moves to challenge the ways in which LGBT efforts often leave behind the most marginalized of queer people, including those with multiple intersecting oppressed identities. This quote is then pushing the LGBTQ community to be as radically inclusive as much of the rhetoric claims to be. *Queer* is used here to refer to all people at the margins of societal norms, and highlight the fact that different strategies need to be employed to meet everyone’s needs.

In examining the data, *transgender* and *trans* are performing two different functions in the texts, and I suggest that *transgender* is convenient for more formal situations. *Transgender* also appears more frequently in publications that are not from an LGBTQ specific site<sup>29</sup>. For example, *The Gazette* is an online Colorado Springs newspaper that published a report on billboards around the city that were opposed same-sex marriage and wrote “heterosexual Americans learn they have beloved friends, colleagues and relatives who are lesbian, bisexual, transgender or self-identified ‘queer.’” Here, both *transgender* is used, and *queer* is specified as “self-identified” and put in quotations marks, presumably to protect the author in case of any

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<sup>29</sup> <http://gazette.com/editorial-bully-billboard-calls-colorado-springs-a-city-of-hate/article/1605675>

backlash on the word choice. *Trans* on the other hand is used in conversations specifically about the interaction of and relationship between *trans* and *queer* identities<sup>30</sup>. Some people identify as *trans*, or *queer*, or both, or neither. However the identities are framed, *trans* suggests a comfort and familiarity with the vocabulary, and often it signals being in the LGBTQ community.

*Transgender* is a longer word, with more syllables and more awkward to pronounce (though the same number of syllables as *lesbian*). *Trans* is slang, shorter and easier to say. But if a person is not in the LGBTQ community, then *trans* might be too familiar, too casual, and that person may think that it's offensive. To be safe, *transgender* is used. This is another example of in community and out of community differences. The lexical shift from *trans* to *transgender* in community is done often for clarity, in the case of distinguishing from *transsexual*, or to reach out of community folks. The out of community members seem to rarely use *trans* even in casual conversations, which could signal a lack of comfort with the familiar *trans*, much as there is a moderate discomfort with *queer*. While numbers tell one story, qualitative data from queer bloggers outlines different ways of negotiating linguistic determinations.

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<sup>30</sup> *ColorLines* is an online news publication focused on amplifying marginalized voices, and in an article entitled "15 Remarkable Women of Color Who Rocked 2015" included two trans women of color, Mya Taylor and Kiki Rodriguez, for their groundbreaking film *Tangerine*.



### Chapter 3: Queer(ish) Bloggers Blogging Queerly

While numbers tell one story about language use, critically analyzing people's writing and on-the-ground negotiations about identity terms tells another. In this chapter I continue to investigate if usage suggests that *queer* can address a unified community by examining the writings and comments of butch lesbian bloggers. I chose this subset of the LGBTQ community because it is an often underrepresented and underreported group.<sup>31</sup> These bloggers engage with each other and their readers in explicit conversations about the different labels and language used to refer to the queer community. Without an agreement by in-community members about what appropriate language and actions are, explicit definitions of identity words are difficult to find. In place of this, in-community members are beginning to form a lexicon of their own.

#### A Queer Methodology

I closely analyzed four different blogs by self-identified butch lesbian bloggers, only three of which are represented in the following sections. Interestingly, one of the blogs did not critically engage with the term *queer*, language choice, or the structure and composition of an LGBTQ community. The blogs I selected included public comments sections, a range of different labels and words for people within the LGBTQ community, and interesting interactions between the bloggers and the readers who left comments. In analyzing the negotiations and interactions that comprise a reclamation process, these aspects were critical.

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<sup>31</sup> Pride.com, Huffington Post, and The Advocate, all well-known sites for reporting on queer people and happenings, have articles entitled "Where Have All the Butches Gone?"  
<https://www.pride.com/lifestyle/2013/09/05/op-ed-where-have-all-butches-gone>  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/roey-thorpe/where-have-all-the-butches-gone\\_b\\_4025929.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/roey-thorpe/where-have-all-the-butches-gone_b_4025929.html)  
<https://www.advocate.com/commentary/riki-wilchins/2013/01/14/where-have-all-butches-gone>

For each blog, I searched for instances where *queer* was used, where discussions of language and terminology arose, and how the authors and commenters expressed their opinions about shifting linguistic patterns within the LGBTQ community. In coding the data, I looked to find commonalities and recurring themes. I chose to focus on and explore further the key themes of the fear and consequences of miscommunication, the value of specificity, and the use of both respectful and disrespectful words.

### Miscommunication

One of the recurring points brought up by the bloggers is the fact that miscommunication runs rampant throughout the community, and this creates tension. MainelyButch brings this to the forefront of a discussion, identifying a generational gap as one of the contributing factors: “I feel like language in the LGBT community and in general has changed and is continuing to change so much lately. Every time I turn around the ‘proper’ way to address someone or say something has changed up on me. I just can’t keep up.” This feeling of being unable to stay current leads to a generational gap<sup>32</sup>, where the younger folks are upset when older queer community members don’t use the same language that they do, and where older queer community members are frustrated by the lack of understanding from younger folks about the challenges they faced just to be able to call themselves *queer*. One of MainelyButch’s readers,

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.attitude.co.uk/article/17046/young-queer-people-shouldnt-be-obliged-to-care-about-lgbt-history-and-thats-the-biggest-sign-of-success-there-is-opinion-1/>

This article was written by a self-identified young queer person who called for an end to the condescending nature of queer elders who constantly remind the younger generations of everything they sacrificed and suffered through. The responses to this article ranged from resounding agreement, to critiques that highlighted that without the efforts and labor of queer elders, this author would be living in a very different world. A number of people emphasized that there is a gap because of nearly an entire generation of LGBTQ community members lost to AIDS, and that the lack of respect for those people and their memories is one of the reasons why the younger and older folks cannot connect on an intimate level.

MermaidPirate, agrees that “new” vocabulary is challenging and wishes for people to be more understanding when mistakes are made:

We agree that the labels thing has gotten a bit out of control. Yes, everyone should get to identify as they wish, and ask for others to call them by whatever words feel right to them – – AND it would be great if we could also all ease up on each other if/when we make mistakes, use a wrong pro-noun (especially if that pronoun is one of the many newish non-binary ones – it can be hard for some of us older folk to keep track of the many words and which of our fellow LGBTQ folks are going by which of the pronouns). (MermaidPirate)

This comment is drawing in “us older folks” and putting that population in a position of making mistakes and potentially miscommunicating, but not having a chance to learn and improve unless others are willing to be patient rather than antagonistic. Another reader, Jamie Ray, left a comment that reads: “No one has a copyright on the words gay, lesbian, butch, trans, transgender, or transmasculine. My version may look different from your version, but it is just as valid. I have used all of them, concurrently, and if it annoys or confuses some people, that is their problem, not mine.” By offering up a personal account of how Ray uses labels simultaneously and to complement one another, this post validates a person’s right to interpret language for themselves and use it however they deem fit. Rather than policing other people’s word choices, this reader advocates for individual determination of meaning. In keeping with that idea, MainelyButch wants her readers to understand that, “Nit picking goes on all over and people love to think that *their way* is the only way to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or whatever you want, just fill in the blank.” This in-community bickering and disagreement is one of the reasons that out of community members complain about the abundance of labels and the lack of coherency, and it emphasizes that they share similar concerns of having stable definitions that in-community members voice.

Part of the motivation for reclaiming *queer* was to have a term that could encompass the entire expansive community, a word that didn't have the same limitations as *gay*, and could serve as way to unify people of different generations, experiences, and opinions. Clearly, *queer* has not achieved this lofty aspiration. What it has done instead, is introduce a topic for debate that is accessible for many people to engage with. There are communities forming around this reclamation and negotiation process, regardless of identity, as evidence by these online blog forums. Jamie Ray, again a reader that frequently comments on MainelyButch's blogs, recalls the history of changing language pertaining to LGBTQ people, and how those changes reflect societal growth and should be seen as positive rather than negative. Ray writes: “

If you look at the history/herstory of terms that are used by others to identify us and by us to self-identify – they need to keep evolving. We are not homosexuals, homophiles, or any of the mid-1950's terms. It took a long time to get the mainstream to use lesbian and gay, but that didn't work for some people in the community so we added butch, dyke, femme, queer etc. It will keep changing every so often – we need new words because everyone doesn't identify as either gay or straight – man or woman – we need more terms for the middle and for people as they change. (Ray)

The comment sections of the blogs are spaces where readers and bloggers alike determine in what sense identity terms are used. For instance, an EffingDykes post ignited an argument about whether someone who identified as a lesbian could have and enjoy sex with men. One reader commented about labels and the right and ability to label oneself, writing “I had a lesbian friend call me out on being ‘bisexual’ because I sometimes sleep with boys, when that is not at all how I identify.” A response to this post reads “...so how are you NOT bisexual again? It seems that you're implying you use the label ‘lesbian’ (incorrectly, I might add) so you can avoid being rejected. Throwing out the tired ‘labels are meaningless’ argument doesn't change the fact that you are bi and too chickenshit to admit it.” This spurred an entire thread, with support being named for each perspective shown above. Some comments agreed that the label *lesbian* means

that a person should not enjoy having sex with men, while others claimed this was too strict and interpretation. But either way, there was agreement that there were “right” and “wrong” ways to use the words, and that it mattered whether or not people got it right. Each individual presented and an alternative way of understanding and using language, which inherently resists coming to a consensus. An example of each of these is as follows, “Um, bisexual doesn't mean you're attracted to each sex equally, but ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ do mean that you EXCLUSIVELY sleep with people of the same sex,” and to which another reader responded: “They literally NEVER SAID that they identify as a lesbian, how many boys they sleep with or are attracted to, or anything that would inspire this sort of response. Maybe they just don't want ANY label, bi or lesbian or otherwise. You don't get to decide that they're bi and absolutely have to identify as such.” One of the final posts, attempting to name the legitimacy of both sides of the argument, reads: “For the record, if you ARE bi, own it. Queer is queer at the end of the day.” This comment demonstrates the umbrella capabilities of *queer*. While there continue to be debates in the comments around what *lesbian* and *bisexual* mean, and who can claim each of these identities, no one was arguing that *lesbian* and *bi* were captured under *queer*.

There is a clear disconnect between what is seen as outdated vocabulary and the new-fangled words. MainelyButch writes,

Daily I am surprised by the “new” use of “old” words; the newer definitions and meanings of some. Start with the word we all know and use in a zillion different ways: Queer. Now we know the dictionary meaning to be “odd or unusual” to be short. But then we all know the meaning when it’s used to describe someone’s sexual preference for the same sex...i.e. “He/she is queer as a three dollar bill.” meaning that he/she is gay...another word...Gay....now that is supposed to mean “happy and joyful” by the dictionary, but when used to describe me it means I like pussy, and I’m a bit queer. (MainelyButch, “Those Darned Definitions!”)

This excerpt emphasizes the multiplicity of interpretations for both *gay* and *queer*. Depending on a person's perspective, each word could mean a variety of different things, which contributes to the disconnect and miscommunication that community members are experiencing.

### The Value of Specificity

MainelyButch writes, "I remember the day when it was bad enough to be known as 'queer'; when the word 'lesbian' was something you read in the dictionary and came from some Greek mythology class." She embraces *butch* because it both resists and confirms the stereotypes and images the word conjures in people's minds. She speaks about the powerful, commanding presence of the butch lesbian, and how the words *lesbian* and *queer* don't capture that essence. MainelyButch notes, "I heard the word 'Butch' for the first time [in the early 80s]....other than as my Dad's nickname....used to describe the tomboyish women in my Army unit. And I knew that that word described who I felt that I was...Butch. I didn't use the word to identify myself for several more decades, as it was a more derogatory term for quite a long time." The hesitation to identify as Butch was rooted in attempting to avoid discrimination and conflict. As a female-bodied person who presents in a masculine way, MainelyButch states that despite not openly identifying as Butch for many years, it has been an integral part of her identity for longer than she used that particular word to describe herself. This is an example of a local, focused reclamation of *butch* for this blogger. Entering into the LGBTQ community as a butch lesbian is how she "queers spaces" and complicates conversations dependent on the binaries of *gay* versus *straight*, or *cis* versus *trans*.

MiddleAgeButch offers her own explanation for what it means to be butch. She writes: "I had been writing a piece on 'the middle [of boy-girl].' If you identify as butch, you know this

place all too well. Like the back of your hand, the bottom of your Dr. Marten's or the pattern on your favorite tie." In an earlier post, devoted to musing about labels and language, is a more extensive definition: "[Butch is] the tomboy, the jock, the race car driver, the single mother and the Supreme Court justice. The single gal who can fix a plumbing leak and the gardener who likes to play in the dirt. There's a million shades of butch. And some don't even involve flannel shirts or tattoos. Imagine that." By saying, "there's a million shades of butch," she raises the question of why *butch* is not just replaced with *queer*. Specifically, she says she is part of the queer community, but finds the most acceptance and comfort as part of the butch community instead. *Queer* could be used to encompass the multiplicity of identities and presentation, as well as a person's location within the LGBTQ community, much as *butch* does. But, while *queer* might work, it clearly doesn't hold the same intensity of meaning and emotion for the authors that *butch* does. As previously noted, the ways that people define themselves are extremely important, and especially throughout in-group communications, specificity allows for more productive spaces.

MiddleAgeButch and MainelyButch are showcasing the importance of one particular identity term, and while it can encompass different ideas and experiences, it provides a subset within a larger community that offers additional validation and support. *Butch* is not *trans*, but it goes beyond *queer* to create a more closely-connected group, and that distinction is one that both authors spend a considerable amount of time and space delving into, constantly revising their stance and explanations. MainelyButch writes: "I am a trans ally. I get crap about it from my lesbian counterparts quite often. I get accused of wanting to *be* trans myself. Anyone who has that kind of hate for me or any other person – male or female, gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, gender-queer, gender-variant, etc etc. can kiss my skinny white ass."

While not trans herself, she includes *trans* as an identity that falls under the LGBTQ umbrella, and one that should be unconditionally respected, though distinct from *butch*. MainelyButch continues: “I know that within the LGBT community that it’s a popular belief that many Butch lesbians will transition to male. As a kid I was known as a super Tomboy and as I grew up I didn’t change, I became an adult Tomboy....better known as a Butch woman.” This label of “butch woman” does not settle into the gender binary, nor does it fall under the heading of *transgender*. It remains its own entity. MiddleAgeButch adheres to a similar belief and in her own blog explains: “Sometimes I take great pride in being viewed as a man, and I play along. Sometimes I find it amusing. Other times, it’s annoying. It all has to do with what I’m wearing and where I’m going and who I’m with and my state of mind at the time.” This conditional acceptance of “sir”, when it is problematic at certain times and not at others, is once again an example of the inconsistency and fluidity of identity. MiddleAgeButch does not apologize for this shifting emotional reaction to “sir”, nor does she claim to want to change her reaction. The changeability is simply another aspect of a complex *butch* identity.

*Queer*, in the larger community, is constantly reevaluated and renegotiated by the people who claim *queer* as an identity. It means something different for nearly everyone, and yet it is broad enough that even with those differences, it is able to bring a sense of unity. The Deviant Dyke, commenting on an EffingDykes post, writes: “I don’t think adhering to hetero rules or expectations serves the queer community very well,” using *queer* to denote anyone who isn’t straight, while directly below that comment, Jessica writes “[the queer community] is more tight knit (generally) than the straight or even the trans community.” This puts *queer* in the space of the half-umbrella, covering sexuality but not gender. In spite of this, *queer* serves as a way to see



other people who have struggled or celebrated similar circumstances, and whether or not that forms a unified community, it is powerful tool of visibility.

### (Dis)Respectful Language

Fear is a powerful emotion that arises throughout the blogs and comments.

MiddleAgeButch, in discussing her attempts to enter a writing group to hold herself accountable for blog and book writing drafts, confesses, “[t]he only thing holding me back was fear. Because what if I committed to this group? ... scarier [than committing], what if no one underst[ands] my words and they all f[ind] it really weird and strange?” In the blogging sphere, words are capable of bringing people together and also can fracture relationships, making words an important part of community building. A comment posted by Boi-Princess on MainelyButch’s blog reads, “I was...not focused on being offended...nor did I care about PC, sometimes you need to just say it and to h\*ll with PC [and] point blank put it out there or your thoughts and message gets watered down.” The idea is that getting too wrapped up in always using the proper language and attempting to avoid offending anyone may limit the ways that people are able to express themselves.

MainelyButch suggests, “We need to have these tough conversations, listen – really LISTEN – to each other and have some compassion.” She claims that active listening is a way to unify people regardless of personal identity, and to get around the language gap that often creates rifts between community members. The problem, as pointed out by Persistentlyfem, a commenter on MainelyButch’s post, is that “our community is...already so impacted by the combined weight of misogyny and lesbophobia.” These two systems of oppression and fear combine to exclude lesbians, and in particular, butch lesbians, from conversations. Centering

voices which are otherwise often overlooked is a way to push against the hegemonic structures of power. These bloggers, and many of the readers who leave comments, find that embracing Butch as a term and defining for themselves what *queer* means, is a way to combat lesbophobia by proudly embracing a distinctly lesbian identity. In addition, *queer* is a word with a history of disrupting hierarchies and power structures and using that word in whatever context or meaning a person intends, is a technique recalls that history of resistance.

Contrary to the attempts to appease a wide variety of readers and use proper and polite language is the methodology that EffingDykes employs in her blogs. EffingDykes calls out LGBTQ community members for policing other in-community folks, but she doesn't concern herself with using respectful language or avoiding offending people. One of her blogs reads: "we queers pay so much lip service to being inclusive that the stringent policing of rigid boundaries *within* the community always takes me by surprise." She continues by writing "homos, the queer community has expanded exponentially in recent decades," but notes that the expansion has not done much for coalition and community building. If people within the LGBTQ community cannot show respect for each other, why should people outside of the community offer respect at all?

Respect and respectability politics, the idea that some people within marginalized groups will police other members of that group to encourage conformity to mainstream values and practices, is the topic of ongoing conversations. Some people in the LGBTQ community claim that fitting in is a way to survive in a world that isn't built for queer people. Others disagree and harken back to the radical queer groups that refused to be respectable for people who didn't respect them. The difference in approach can be seen in the different writing styles of the bloggers. MainelyButch and MiddleAgeButch both offer space for dissent and educating others.

They try to keep people engaged in the conversation and not overly offend folks, to establish a pattern of communication where everyone is able to be heard. MainelyButch explicitly states, “I respect each person’s right to choose their own gender identity, their own sexuality, and their own lifestyle. I only ask that I receive that same respect in return.” EffingDykes does not format her blog in this manner. Instead, she is bold and loud and unapologetic, using greetings such as ‘Hey, skanks!’, ‘What up, sluts?’, ‘Good morning, faggy darlings!’, ‘Hola, homosexuelles!’, ‘Ciao, you filthy perverts.’, and ‘Tramps! It’s a gorgeous, gorgeous day’ without ever stopping to explain her reasoning behind these choices.

EffingDykes actively and explicitly goes against respectability politics, gearing her material for a different audience and different goals than MainelyButch or MiddleAgeButch. Much like reclamation efforts themselves, there is no singular process or end point for language change. EffingDykes intentionally disrupts norms and radicalizes her writing in order to get people’s attention and incite emotion. That emotion motivates people to react and respond, engage in discourse, and generally move the conversation forward. The rhetorical strategy is less about appeasing people or creating a space where everyone’s opinion can be heard and respected, and more about having passionate voices break new linguistic and cultural ground. While using contested and potentially objectional language means that some people may be offended, it is also a way of normalizing and bringing into the conversation many words which have not yet and will not extensively be addressed in this paper. *Tramps*, *sluts*, *fags*, and *dykes* are only a few of the instances of contested language. *Queer* in various forms, including *qweeahs*, *queertopians*, *queermos*, and *queers*, appears multiple times. The language that EffingDykes uses, from the blog handle to the frequent references to “lezzers” and “lady gays” centers and specifically identifies the imagined audience. This is not a blog that is attempting to

invite people in, from outside of the community, or even from inside the LGBTQ community who do not identify as lesbian. The reclamation of *queer* and other words that is displayed in the blog is happening at a localized and personal level, where the blogger is not concerned with getting other people to agree with her language or perspective. Where so much of the discourse revolves around the importance of inclusivity and diversity of perspectives and opinions, EffingDykes goes against those conventions and has created an online space that is for a particular group. It is only for the well-informed, lesbian inclined, who don't mind profanity. And, given the hundreds of comments on many of the posts, there is a significant market for that kind of writing.

Why this discourse matters

The word *queer* itself upends traditional conventions and presents an opportunity for those who are typically marginalized and without power to have a say in the larger conversation. There is a hierarchy of identities even within the LGBTQ community that grants people who are gay, white, and cisgender more power and influence than others. This is occurring at the same time when the non-queer community has more power than the queer community, often magnifying the imbalance. EffingDykes claims:

since we were all raised in a heteronormative world, pretty much only seeing heteronormative role models (unless we were luckyasses raised by queers), and only observing heteronormative relationship dynamics represented in all forms of media, many of us queers are... *possibly! maybe!* a little behind when dealing with our romantic relationships. (EffingDykes)

She goes on to say that this socialization and lack of role models impacts people beyond romantic relationships to interactions such as business relationships, academic arenas, and professional presentations as another area where queer people are at a deficit.

In the Effing Dykes blog, the comments are not always in support of the author's views, but out of the four I have analyzed, this is the blog that has the largest and most expansive comment sections. The power that the readers have in the format of the blogs is significant. They engage with other readers, and often the blogger, to voice what they believe to be true. The people who are commenting are having active, and sometimes heated, conversations about language. The power that people have varies based upon the sphere and medium of communication. In the lesbian blogging sphere, lesbians are the ones with the most power. They have expertise and lived experience that can drown out the voices of others. Outside of that sphere, lesbians have significantly less power, even in the queer community. In conversing about language and how language choice affects people, naming the fact that an imbalance of power exists in the first place is a critical step in effective communication.

In asking whether or not *queer* can serve a unified community, and indeed who would be included if it does, it is necessary to examine how the people who hold LGBTQ identities negotiate the linguistic changes that are occurring. In the case of these bloggers, it is evident that the people who hold the identity as part of the queer community are actively conversing about what that means. Rather than a definition imposed by an out-group entity, this in-group determination indicates a location of power and authority.

In a post called "Stop the Stupid In-Fighting!", MainelyButch points out that language and people are constantly evolving, but instead of holding space for many different perspectives and opinions, queer folks spend their time and energy trying to convince people that "We need to be united and we need to learn that our differences can unite us, not let them separate us," (MainelyButch, "Stop the Stupid In-Fighting!"). Again, this idea of unity and community are

brought up, in this case urging people to not try and ignore or erase differences, but rather that difference is a strength.

### Queerly Concluding the Investigation of *Queer*

Briefly comparing the corpus data to the blog data, I found that more nuanced and direct conversations about who or what can be considered *queer* are occurring in the blogs and their comments. Part of this seems to be because of the back and forth communication, where ideas and thoughts are publicly offered for commentary and engagement. The explicit invitation to respond not as present in the online publications, which primarily relay information without providing space for critical feedback. Having the space to openly debate words and their meanings enables active and current conversations to progress with the shifting perspectives of society. The online news publications are further behind the most recent negotiations because of their lack of discourse. The bloggers have a more expansive and varied vocabulary than the online news publications, exercising their autonomy and authority in conversations about language. Nevertheless, in both the blogs and the online news publications, there was evidence of a reclamation narrative that differs from the simple reclaiming of *queer* for a positive umbrella term that has been previously researched and explored.

I began this paper by sharing a personal anecdote where my use and support of the word *queer* was censored and challenged. As a queer person, I did not hold authority in the conversation. This is the opposite of the experiences created by the authors and readers of blogs, where the people who hold an identity are negotiating the boundaries of language. Reclamation is a process in which a group which is often underrepresented and unheard can claim language for themselves. This means that people who are directly affected by the word are the people who hold the authority and power to decide its use and meaning. One of the advantages of community members determining their own language is that they are the ones who best know their identities. Those negotiations bring forth the importance of having language to describe and categorize

people, while simultaneously commenting on the confusion and ambiguity of labels. The idea of ‘the queer community’ is fluid and shifting, and *queer* can often only suggest a fragile or fractured community, not one that is wholly unified. As more and more words and identities are added to the extensive LGBTQ community, *queer* has a unique role. It can be a way to bring people of various identities together, to pool resources and offer support, but simultaneously *queer* often fails to hold space for trans or bisexual folks.

*Queer* continues to experience reclamation efforts, as in-community people try to collaboratively decide what the appropriate applications of the word are. There is not a singular, neat consensus, and the conversations range from some people supporting the use of *queer*, to others who oppose it, to everyone attempting to determine what *queer* actually means. The discourse that takes place is inherently valuable, as it allows for people to self-determine the language that is used to refer to them. Actively changing language, even if there is not a clear goal for this change, is a way to resist structures of oppression. Queer people deciding for themselves what *queer* means is one example of that kind of reclamation. I believe that the end goal for the reclamation of *queer* should not be to make it less messy or ambiguous. In my opinion, that would take away from the long, contentious history of a word that resists a single definition in part because the community itself resists definition. Having one meaning of *queer* would push people out of the queer community, whatever that happens to be in any particular moment. Instead, I believe that the reclamation of *queer* is an ongoing process that invites critical conversations and introspection, as well as sharing of thoughts and ideas in a way that forms a community of people just because they are engaging with the word. That phenomenon of engagement is worthwhile.



As it is an ongoing process, with shifting opinions and perspectives, the data I gathered are only accurate for the population I analyzed at this particular point. I look forward to future debates and negotiations that would challenge my conclusions here.



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