How queer everything is to-day!
Letter from the editors

Queer issues have been in the media a lot recently: this summer’s controversy over South African athlete Caster Semenya is just one example. The reaction this generated gave a glimpse of a society where gender essentialism still prevails - and still has the ability to cause pain and distress. The furore erupted simply because Semenya does not conform to Western ideals of what a female athlete should look like.

The LBGT community often neglects aspects of sexuality and gender which aren’t adequately described by the acronym. We are just as guilty as heteronormative society of marginalizing those who don’t fit our labels.

‘Queer’ is a term coined to redress this problem. It rejects essentialism and embraces the full diversity of the human condition. Self defining as queer subverts heteronormative, heterosexist categories, and because our political structures are predicated on these categories, defining as queer can also be seen as an act of political defiance.

These ideas are reflected in the following articles, which explore the importance of queer both within academia and outside of it. We hope you enjoy The Queer Issue.

Ray and Josh
Hi everyone,

Welcome to the autumn edition of [no definition], the only magazine written by students for Cambridge LBGT. My thanks go to Josh and Ray for putting together this issue.

At the beginning of this term, the LBGT committee experienced significant changes after some of our officers graduated. We had to say goodbye to Sher-een Akhtar, who had to resign as president to start her Erasmus program abroad. As chair I then became the new president of CUSU LBGT. We recruited new members to fill in positions including chair, treasurer, women’s officer and trans reps.

Our new chair, Beatrice de Vela, has been working hard on creating new relationships with other societies including the Jewish Society and on raising awareness of LBGT issues internationally. Anna Goulding, our women’s officer, has been running the weekly women’s coffee and our grad reps, Wayne Bateman and Rhiannon Mulherin have been working hard to welcome the new LGBT grads. Rendezvous at Vodka Revolutions continues to grow with the popular pre-Rendezvous parties, which were organised by Tony Hollands (communications) and Fiona Dickinson (sponsorship). My thanks go to Fiona and Jack for securing our sponsorship deal with KPMG and for building a link with Trojan Publishing (Gay Times and Diva).

The socials and welfare officers have been helping the new arrivals to settle in and my thanks also go to Tony Hollands for keeping everyone updated via LISTINGS. If you’re not on the mailing list, please contact Liam Brierley, our computing officer, at computing@cusu-lbgt.com. Along with our treasurer, they have been essential to the smooth running of CUSU LBGT.

Highlights of this term have included the Christmas party and the speakers’ events, in particular, Mikey Walsh, author of Gypsy Boy, who was interviewed recently in Attitude. And speaking of Attitude, we invited the great editor himself, Matthew Todd, to talk about the magazine.

For next term, we have an exciting line-up of events. We are working hard to organise LBGT Awareness Week. There will be a launch party, guest speakers, discussions, a radio show, and a film night to raise awareness of LBGT issues. Along with that, we’re planning lots of socials from speed dating to a massive LBGT formal. Our plans also include website makeover and a collaborative issue with one of the student newspapers.

I hope you’ve all had a great Michaelmas term and… happy Christmas!

Raymond Li
CUSU LBGT President
Imogen May

Imogen May is a 26-year-old Anglia Ruskin student who has regularly attended CUSU-LBGT events and socials. She has a progressive illness similar to muscular dystrophy. Following emergency surgery in July 2009, Imogen has lost the ability to speak.

Imogen lives on her own (with 24 hour care) in a village which is a 50 minute bus ride away from Cambridge. She is a vibrant, outgoing woman who is in the final year of a photography degree.

Imogen’s Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) has been very supportive but the NHS does not have the funding to provide communication aids for adults. Her SALT did manage to find an old electronic device, however it had a very basic interface and was physically difficult for Imogen to use as it required her to hold a stylus. In any case, this device broke after just a few days of use, leaving Imogen with just an alphabet card.

The hardware that Imogen really needs - which she has used effectively for a month-long trial is the Liberator Eco2. However, this unit costs £7000 which is far beyond her means. She has had to return the trial unit and now feels very vulnerable and isolated as she can no longer communicate adequately, let alone effectively.

Ideally Imogen needs the Liberator with an Eye-gaze system - so her eye movement can control a mouse pointer - but this costs £11000. As she really needs to get communicating urgently, in the first instance she is trying to raise £7000 for the basic unit.

Please help Imogen to raise the money for a communication aid which can return her quality of life. This could be by...

* Making a donation
* Raising money through sponsorship
* Spreading the word - tell your friends and anyone you think might be able to help
* Tweet or blog about Imogen’s appeal - please include a link to Imogen’s website (www.imogenmay.com), and use the tag #Imogen on Twitter

To find out more information, including how to donate to the appeal, visit www.imogenmay.com.
BEYOND THE BINARY

How do we conceptualise queer orientations?

Ludmila Demtchenko explains

‘The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects.’
So wrote the U.S. sexologist Alfred Kinsey in 1948, and sixty years on his ideas are still widely influential. The scale he developed for depicting sexual orientation proposes that human sexuality exists as a spectrum, from exclusively heterosexual (zero) to exclusively homosexual (six). Most people, Kinsey stressed, do not lie at the absolutes.

Today many recognise that sex - used to refer to biological characteristics such as chromosomes and anatomy - is also a spectrum. Chromosomal configurations outside of XX and XY are widespread, and 1% of live births show some genital ambiguity. And intersex people, like all people, may identify as any gender. Gender (as distinct from sex) refers to factors not covered by biology: psychological, sociological and so on. The traditional gender binary is based on the view that physical sex is binaried - which fails to account for intersex people - and that peoples’ genders match their physical sex: a worldview comprehensively rejected by many in the transgender community. When we use terms like ‘homosexual’, ‘heterosexual’ or ‘bisexual’, we describe attraction from a binaried identity (male or female) towards a binaried absolute (the same gender, the other gender, or both the available options.) The reality, on the other hand, is far more complicated than this. Gender is not a binary quality.

‘Transgender’ describes people whose internal gender identity does not match their physical sex, or who sit outside of the gender binary; people whose biological sex and gender identity generally match are referred to as ‘cisgender’. It should be emphasised that the term ‘transgender’ is subject primarily to self-definition, and that ‘cis/trans’ themselves are not binaries. ‘Transgender’ can describe people who are transsexual, who identify elsewhere on a gender spectrum, who are agender, genderqueer, third gender, polygender, androgyneous, transvestite, gender variant, gender fluid, gender questioning or gender non-conforming. It can be used temporarily as well.
as absolutely: play with gender roles is especially common in queer relationships. Helen Boyd writes, ‘If people say to me ‘You’re queer!’... I’d challenge them to try having sex as three different genders with a lover who has a couple too and let me know how heterosexual they feel afterwards. For me, being queer means that no-one gets to tell me what to call what Betty and I do... it takes us outside of categories that would restrict and define us.’

Rather than using the term ‘bisexual’, many choose to describe themselves as being ‘attracted to people’. A variety of terms have been coined for this (omnisexual, pansexual, sexual) and one of the simplest is ‘queer’.

‘If people say to me ‘You’re queer!’... I’d challenge them to try having sex as three different genders with a lover who has a couple too and let me know how heterosexual they feel afterwards.’

‘Queer’ can also be a useful grouping term - it slips more easily off the tongue than convoluted acronyms like ‘LBGTQQIA’ - or otherwise used to mean ‘not straight.’ From this base definition of ‘attracted to people’, we can create any number of other descriptions: ‘attracted to femmes / androgynous people / police officers’, and so on. Descriptions of attraction entirely suffixed by ‘-sexual’ can also be problematic for those asexual people who do not experience any sexual attraction, but still have romantic or aesthetic leanings. Terms like ‘homo-aesthetic’ have been coined to deal with this shortcoming in the ways we conceptualise attraction.

Where does this leave the terms ‘gay’ and ‘straight’? The website ‘The Bisexual Index’ suggests ‘gay’ to mean ‘attracted to people of a broadly similar gender’ and ‘straight’ to mean ‘attracted to people of a broadly different gender’ - which still leaves plenty of room for fluidity and diversity. Considering gender definitions outside of ‘male/female’, and sexuality descriptions outside of ‘gay/straight/bi’ can be interesting and valuable ways of considering and reconsidering personal identity. It could be that there are as many gender identities and manifestations as there are people, and potentially even more descriptions of sexuality. ‘Queer’ takes us through ‘not straight’ and outside of restrictive categories, towards greater freedom in self-definition.
Del La Grace is an artist and photographer from California. Self-defining as intersex by ‘deliberate design’, Del’s work encapsulates his wholesale rejection of gender binary; publications include ‘The Drag King Book’ (co-produced with Judith Halberstam, author of ‘Female Masculinity’) and ‘Sex Works’, a visual exploration of the history of sex in the queer scene, 1978-2005. Why is Del La Grace a queer icon? In his own words, LaGrace is a ‘gender terrorist’; his work constantly challenges, reassesses, and toys with the heteronormative boxes we are often forced to tick when subscribing to particular genders or sexualities.

Théroigne was an active and vocal figure in the Girondist campaign against Robespierre during the French Revolution. She was renowned for her masculine public appearance, complete with sword and pistol. The challenges she put to the sexual order during the revolutionary era are epitomised by parodies that ended up in pamphlets during the early 1790s; the anonymous engraving above, entitled ‘Grand Débandement de l’Armée Anticonstitutionelle’, pictures Théroigne leading an army of revolutionary women in actively repelling the opposition by baring their buttocks. Théroigne herself is pictured as using the visual power of her cunt to deter her political enemies. Whether or not Théroigne wished herself to be seen as such, her life - and her death - encapsulates the foundations of what I consider to be the queer mode. Unfazed by the Revolution’s aggressive ambivalence towards the place of female sexuality, Théroigne stuck by her non-conformist self-expression, her outspoken, radical politics, and, when faced with imprisonment within the Salpêtrière asylum, refused to clothe herself in defiance.

JD Samson is so queer she makes me want to do a queer little dance. As a third of feminist electro-punk band Le Tigre, a member of Peaches’ backing group, and half of remixed group MEN, JD has been musically committed to engaging with queer minorities for most of her adult life. One of JD’s well-loved Le Tigre songs, Viz, sums up her personal experiences as a sexual minority: ‘Walk in, give him my name, looks up and down, takes a good look at my pecs […] They call it climbing and I call it visibility’. JD is a figurehead for re-interpreting butch identities within the queer mode; she’s not only one of the faces of queer female masculinity, but a DIY music revolutionary, bringing liberation from a restrictive binary paradigm through the medium of funky poppy punky bleep.
**icons**

Following this summer’s Gay Icons exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, [Faith Taylor](#) offers a queerer selection of iconic figures.

**Antony Grey**

b.1927 -

Antony Grey (born Anthony Edgar Gartside Wright), is a perfect example of the behind-the-scenes folk who campaigned tirelessly for the rights we now take for granted. During the early 1960s, Grey acted as secretary for the Homosexual Law Reform Society, as part of the homophile movement that had made its way across the Atlantic, via publications by American societies like Mattachine and Daughters of Bilitis. He was also the pioneering secretary, and later director, of the Albany trust, an organisation primarily focused on providing psychological counselling for sexual minorities. Antony was instrumental in campaigning for and promoting the Sexual Offences Bill, which was eventually passed in Parliament in 1967, decriminalising sexual relationships between men. Antony’s individual, grassroots determination to overturn a system of law that oppresses and persecutes a sexual minority should serve as a good reference point for queer activists in the 21st century.

**Chevalier d’Eon de Beaumont**

b.1728 – d.1810

Chevalier d’Eon was a gender-ambiguous French soldier, spy, Freemason and diplomat. Until 1777, D’Eon lived and worked as a man. After the death of Louis XV, however, D’Eon demanded that he be legally recognised as a woman; the new King Louis XVI agreed, on the condition that D’Eon dress in an appropriately feminine fashion. Examinations of d’Eon’s body after her death in 1810 showed that she had been ‘anatomically male’ at birth. Whatever her physical make-up, D’Eon’s case was clearly an extraordinary one, and her status as a role model for anyone wishing to publicly transition has led to her name being used for the Beaumont Society, a long-standing trans group.

**Amanda Palmer**

b. 1976 -

Amanda is the lead singer of ‘punk-burlesque’ outfit the Dresden Dolls, who a few years ago churned out masterpieces like ‘Delilah’, ‘Sex Changes’ and ‘Girl Anachronism’. Amanda’s life as an artist and musician has hitherto been riddled with queer. Her embrace-all-with-fervour sexuality, her DIY career as a musician (starting out as a street-performer for years in Boston), her lyrics that deal with everything from teenage rape and abortion to tropes of masculinity within the Columbine massacre; all serve to make her one of my personal queer icons. It might be worth noting that the UK is apparently not ready for the almighty queerness that is Amanda Palmer – the video to her hit ‘Oasis’ was reportedly banned on all British television channels because it ‘made light of religion, rape and abortion’. Unlike all of Eminem’s work, then, which is basically the stuff of Gregorian plainsong.
Frida Kahlo, a Mexican painter, began specializing in self-portraits while recovering from serious injuries to her entire body, including her uterus, caused by a bus accident. Many of these paintings marry Frida's dual conception of her pain and her sexuality; she was openly bisexual, and had numerous affairs with women while she was married to Diego Rivera. Among these women was French singer Josephine Baker. Frida Kahlo is not only a queer icon from the perspective of her art's exploration of fluid sexuality; the pain of her sexual injury and miscarriages carries with the representation of her physical form the pain, limitation and freedom that can be experienced through queer identity. In her self-illustration, Frida in way was constantly reinventing her sexual and gender identities, and constantly transitioning from one physical and psychological plain to another.

John is the writer and director of queer cult flicks ‘Hedwig and the Angry Inch’ and ‘Shortbus’. Both films explore the experiences and challenges faced by members of the queer community; Hedwig’s tale tracks her tragiomic journey of personal discovery, from her growing up in pre-1989 east Berlin to be a homosexual man, to her botched sex change and her subsequent experience of life on the other side of the wall. Both ‘Hedwig’ and ‘Shortbus’ have become staples of queer popular culture; with the latter work’s cast including folk like JD Samson and gender-ambiguous actor Daniela Sea, it’s not hard to see why (also, did I mention the music in Hedwig? It’s literally the best thing ever to happen to my ears).

Esmé was the little-known pioneer of the Minorities Research Group in Britain during the late 1950s and early 1960s. She single-handedly set up the first lesbian periodical in the UK, ‘Arena Three’, which later became ‘Gay Girl Quarterly’. ‘Arena Three’ was an important step in bringing queer women together across the country. It fuelled the establishment of lesbian outreach groups like KENRIC, which brought women together from the peripheries of large urban centres like London, the lively gay scene of which was out of bounds for most women in the post-war era. Esmé’s approach to lesbian outreach has no modern comparison; in the televised series ‘Women Like Us’ [1992], lesbian testimonies describe how Esmé would personally visit closeted women and offer them a forum in which they could be their true selves. Esmé lived and worked for her cause, building from the ground up a network of queer friendship and support.
Rendezvous

Tuesdays at Revolution

This young man is going to a gay night.
In August 1995, the London Review of Books ran an article by the American lesbian critic Terry Castle, exploring evidence of homoeroticism in Jane Austen's letters and novels, and arguing that Austen's most important relationship was in fact with her sister, Cassandra. Mischievously trailed on the front cover under the title, “Was Jane Austen Gay?”, Castle's essay predictably attracted controversy (including an irate letter from a journalist who assumed Terry was a voyeuristic and misogynistic man). http://www.lrb.co.uk/v17/n15/terry-castle/sister-sister.

This is what people who don't know any better, and some who really should, think queer literary theory does: outing famous writers as gay, trying to claim Jane Austen or Shakespeare for their team. Now it's true that one strand of lesbian and gay literary history is the search for a literary genealogy, a tradition of gay and lesbian authors or indeed characters or plots. We could follow this strand back to Edward Carpenter's Iolaus: An Anthology of Friendship (1902), which traces love between men from the ancient world to the modern poetry of Walt Whitman; or to Sex Variant Women in Literature (1956), Jeannette H. Foster's encyclopaedic work on the representation of lesbians and lesbianism from antiquity to the mid-twentieth century. Both these pioneering works are labours of love by writers outside academia: an honourable tradition in lesbian and gay criticism. That tradition continues even today in the scholarly work of novelist Emma Donoghue: Donoghue's new book, Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature, due out next year, was originally going to be called "Lesbian Plots from Geoffrey Chaucer to Sarah Waters". As the inclusion of Chaucer (and many other male authors of varying sexual tastes) reminds us, this kind of criticism is not solely concerned with the works of card-carrying lesbian or gay authors.
But it does assume some kind of recognizable, transhistorical phenomenon: that lesbians and gay men have always existed and that it makes sense to see a connection between us and them. We are a people with a long, diverse and wonderfully rich history.

This is what people who don’t know any better think queer literary theory does: outing famous writers as gay.

Attractive as that idea is, it’s one which queer literary theory regards with considerable scepticism. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84), queer literary theory regards homosexuality not as essentially the same throughout history, but as socially constructed, and as originating in the late nineteenth-century works of sexologists such as Karl-Heinrich Ulrichs and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. The argument is not that nothing sexual happened between men or between women before the late nineteenth century, but that same-sex acts and practices did not constitute an identity before the terminology existed to describe it. Many theorists would argue that heterosexuality as an identity didn’t exist either, and that the concept of heterosexuality doesn’t come into being until it can define itself against homosexuality. The importance of this idea is that it challenges any notion of heterosexuality as natural, and any corresponding notion of homosexuality as unnatural.

Activists old enough to remember the heady days of 1970s gay liberation are sometimes sceptical or bitter about queer theory’s political claims for itself: what is queer theory doing, they ask, that radical drag didn’t already do in its challenge to heterosexuals’ assumptions of their own normality and naturalness – apart, that is, from talking in a deliberately complicated language that nobody except a few initiates can understand? The point about language is a fair one: queer literary theory’s penchant for deconstruction as well as Foucauldian methods can make for formidable reading, as it often does in the works of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Queer literary theory’s arguments about the fluidity and instability of all identity have also come under attack, and not only because of the need for identity categories as rallying points for action (something Judith Butler acknowledges but regrets). Some trans writers criticise queer theory for ignoring or trivializing their attempts to reach a stable gender identity; some lesbian critics also see “queer” itself as a term which reinforces lesbian invisibility.

In my nineteen years as an out lesbian academic working mostly on eighteenth-century English literature, I’ve moved from an essentialist scepticism of queer literary theory to a valuing of its power to push our thinking about sexuality and its relation to discourse as far as it will go. I’m still interested in lesbian narrative possibilities from the eighteenth century to the present, but also in the queer workings of allusion in texts.

The concept of heterosexuality doesn’t come into being until it can define itself against homosexuality.

Much of this change has happened through collaboration with gay men, including co-organizing with Chris Mounsey the biennial Queer People conferences, which involve scholars from all points along the essentialist/constructionist spectrum. The Cambridge Professor of English who recently told a graduate student that “Nobody does queer theory any more” could not be more wrong; there is lots of work still to do, and we’re looking forward to doing it.
'Queer theology' seems oxymoronic to most of us, because we have for far too long witnessed the endless proliferation of heterosexist discourse in the Church. We hear one diatribe after another with no end in sight. At least, that’s how it seems. In actuality, queer theology de-authorises heterosexism within Christianity, exploring critical intersections between secular queer theory and theology. Queer theory de-essentialises political and sexual identities. ‘Queer’, for David Halperin, is ‘an identity without essence’ demarcating ‘not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative’. It embraces manifold non-heteronormative practices (celibacy, for example) not limited to that now ubiquitous acronym ‘LGBT’. The queer theological project (re)discovers a place for queerness within the centre of Christianity, releasing it from the abject peripheral spaces it usually inhabits – not, note, to produce a compromised rapprochement. While constructively dialogical, queer theology claims unique insights that would otherwise be lost within secular discursive settings.

There are, strictly speaking, multiple perspectives within queer theology. One approach exposes the queer erotics deployed in spiritual discourse. St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) is a case in point. In The Dark Night, he articulates spiritual ascent in terms of an eroticism anchored in the Song of Songs. He genders his soul as female and in a typically heteronormative manoeuvre imagines a conjugal relationship between his soul and the male God: ‘The Lover with his beloved/Transforming the beloved in herLover’ (Stanza 5). This formal heterosexuality gives way to homoeroticism through self-identification with the female soul.

Queer theology does not speculate on John’s sexuality – that is, whether he was (anachronistically) ‘gay’, according to the adjudications of contemporary identity politics. And it is not enough simply
to say that John ‘sticks’ at homoeroticism. In fact, John elsewhere cautions against replacing the
desire for God with religious experiences, counselling ‘the stripping off and proper renunciation
of all such experiences for God alone’. He seeks the ultimate
transformation of desire. Erotic desire, in other words, must
serve God.

Elsewhere, queer theology reconstructs Christ’s body as
a body that destabilises gender binarism at the eucharist
and the resurrection. St. Gregory of Nyssa (c.330 – c.395)
postulates a post-gender body at the resurrection, which
recapitulates our pre-fallen non-genitalised corporeality. As
such, I urge that genderqueer, intersexed and transgendered
bodies are unanticipatedly rendered prophetic by Christ. In
my reading, queer bodies gesture – incompletely, by virtue
of creaturely finitude – towards the kind of bodies we will in-
habit at the resurrection, at which gender will be divinely re-
fashioned. Arguably, moreover, at the eucharist, we embrace
the gift of Christ’s queer physicality, which escapes cultural
taxonomies (gender and sexuality among them) and perfo-
rates the fabric of our own physicality. We are thus reassured
that a better hope is present and active in the world, nourish-
ing subversive performances of gender.

To this end, queer theology posits a metaphysic of hope,
grasping at a redemptive trajectory in which bodies and
desires are re-moulded by God. This metaphysic of hope is
sorely lacking in secular contexts, enabling the theologically-
minded to overcome the ‘melancholia’ Judith Butler diagno-
ses. For Butler, gender and sexuality identities are endlessly
repudiated to produce stable ‘identity’; consequently, we
end up mourning the loss of our disavowed selves. The queer
theologian, however, situates and signifies the human body,
its desires and its variously configured identities within God
– or as Bonhoeffer once said, ‘Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O
God, I am Thine.’ Erotic desire, furthermore, cannot be reduc-
tively collapsed into (essentialised) sexual orientation. From
an Augustinian perspective, we should love each other ‘in
the Lord,’ the ‘enjoyment’ of God being primary. This prevents
us from idolising or instrumentalising the other – dangerous
tendencies in the erotic landscape! Desire, therefore, properly
finds its authentic grounding and freedom in God, in whom
all desires are re-negotiated and malleable to divine transfor-
mation.

This has been a necessarily rapid survey of the undulating contours of Christian queering. I hope,
at least, to have opened up a modest space for theologically-informed queer theorising. The Spirit,
moving where it wills (John 3:8), has found an abode in the queer: for those who thought all was lost
in the valley of darkness, God has shown us green pastures.
Newsweek recently ran a story on gay rights in Latin America under the subtitle ‘Now Mature in the West, Gay Power is Growing Worldwide.’ The article plotted the expansion of sexual rights from democratic Western Europe to America in the late 1960s, and its subsequent – and incomplete – filtering to parts of Asia, Africa, and, most recently, Latin America. Its argument is typical of what is increasingly described as a ‘global gay’ narrative. In such accounts, conceptions of international gay rights are shackled to the twin trappings of Eurocentric time and space: rights ‘spread’ geographically from the West to the East and are simultaneously absorbed into a trajectory which sees the West as the future of non-Western gay rights. This imposition of linear universality casts any extra-European discourse on sexual rights as derivative and belated. Of course, the ‘global gay’ narrative has come under fierce attack: at best it condescends and at worst it homogenises, commodifies, depoliticises, and seeks to dominate. Sexuality has become an important category in definitions of modernity. The ‘global gay’ narrative is imperialistic in its attempt to monopolise on these definitions and categories.

Few serious studies of transnational sexuality employ the ‘global gay’ narrative as an analytical framework. This is partly because even the most cursory examination of the actual gender and sexual practices and formulations experienced outside the West show that they remain irreducible to “global gay”’s terms and trajectories. This resistance to Western categories is encapsulated in Peter Jackson’s innovative formulation ‘pre-gay, post-queer’. Jackson interrupts the temporality of gay politics by showing that some non-Western sexual formations pre-date the advent of gay and lesbian politics in the West; in conjunction with this they exceed and confound Anglo-American sexual categories (hence ‘post-queer’). Looking at how sexuality is formulated from a postcolonial perspective can highlight trajectories which go beyond ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’, and ‘queer’ frameworks for understanding. What this exposes is the problem of a wholesale export of sexual terminology and theory, formed in a specific ‘Western’ context. According to queer-postcolonial theory, ‘local’ spaces should not be seen merely as variations on a global theme: they often resist the very theoretical premises on which such a discourse is founded.

But to argue that it is necessary to project ‘queer theory’ onto a global geography is not to say that Western and non-Western sexualities are essentially at odds. On the contrary, Western notions of gay and lesbian identity have been appropriated in non-Western societies, as a result of increasing global interconnectedness. In demanding a multifaceted approach, theories of ‘hybridity’, for example, complicate ‘queer theory’. The interaction between ‘local’ and ‘global’ forces is not stable but is constantly renegotiated. Thus, the process of appropriation should not simply be described as a mix of ‘indigenous’ and ‘global’ forces: the interaction of these forces is set in motion by a measure of agency and subjectivity. This flexibility is lost upon the ‘global gay’ narrative which is bound by available Western sexual categories and divorced from everyday experience. Its obsession with categorical coherence sounds the death toll for any adequately complex engagement with sexual issues.

Such criticisms represent only a small part of what is a strong response to the ‘global gay’ story. However, it seems to me that there is still a problem at the heart of this narrative which has not yet been adequately addressed. The queer-postcolonial critique has shown that the emergence of a non-European discourse of sexual rights should not simply be seen as as a direct import from the West.
for me, the problem runs much deeper: why is it that global sexual rights should be defined against the yardstick of western politics in the first place? Why should we talk in terms of ‘possible alternatives and trajectories’ at all? The central problem with the ‘global gay’ narrative is not that the non-West can ‘achieve modernity’ in alternate ways. The problem is that ‘global gay’ (read ‘Western gay’) is understood as ‘modern’ (by its own definition) in the first place. Surely it is this that must be challenged?

Dipesh Chakrabarty, a postcolonial theorist, has provided a means to provincialise the Eurocentric claim to ‘liberalism’, ‘freedom’, and ‘modernity’. This can be applied to ‘queer’ theory: we must examine the very notion that the West represents ‘modern sexual rights’ in order to unearth the hypocrisy at the heart of this claim. It is often overlooked that much of what is proclaimed to be evidence of the homophobia of ‘traditional’ non-Western societies in fact stems from a legacy of colonial intrusion. For instance, the recent repeal of Section 377 of the Penal Code in India – which marked out homosexuality as ‘unnatural’ – has been described as a ‘triumph’ over ‘Indian conservatism’. This is deeply ironic given that Section 377 was part of a colonial system of law conceived and installed not by ‘traditional’ Indians, but by the British Raj. Section 377 still exists in some of the former British colonies of Asia and Africa and, in this, we are presented with a paradox. It would seem that according to the ‘global gay’ narrative, these countries can only ‘achieve modernity’ by rejecting the legacy of western influence.

“We must examine the notion that the West represents ‘modern sexual rights’ in order to unearth the hypocrisy at the heart of this claim.”

It has not been my intention in this article to undermine the very great work of transnational groups like the ILGA (International Gay and Lesbian Association) and IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission). They provide an expandable terrain for work for queer rights (especially by integrating sexual rights into ideas of universal rights) and, undoubtedly, creativity and agency has increased among previously isolated gay groups. I do believe in working for universal and global rights. My contention is, however, that we need to re-imagine what we mean by these terms.
Seventeen years and thirty thousand dollars later: An Interview with Peterson Toscano

It is testament to the insidious lure of 'gay conversion therapy' that - in spite of regular criticism from queer and pro-queer organisations, methodologies that include segregation by sex (!) in order to practice traditional gender activities, and unconvincing appearances by 'ex-gays' on chat shows - they are still subscribed to all around the world.

Peterson Toscano is a ‘theatrical performance activist’ and co-founder of support group ‘Beyond Ex-Gay’. He uses his considerable experience of gay conversion therapy to satirize the programs and to campaign against them. In Toscano’s quest towards being ex-gay he also became a born again Christian, spent seventeen years in a multitude of ex-gay ministries on three different continents, got married, and even contemplated suicide. By the time he came out as gay in 1999 he had spent more than thirty thousand dollars unsuccessfully trying to turn himself straight. He has written several one-person plays including, ‘Doin’ Time in the Homo No Mo House - How I Survived the Ex-Gay Movement!’ and ‘Transfigurations - Transgressing Gender in the Bible’.

Last term Toscano visited Cambridge to speak about his experience as an ex-gay and, more importantly, his life as an ex-ex-gay. [no definition] caught up with him:

Q: You said in your talk that you don’t think there’s really any sort of success rate from the ex-gay program, and you said that that has some complications in what you define as success. Do you know anyone that has had any measure of success whatsoever, in becoming and remaining an ex-gay?

I know men, who are partnered with women, and as far as I know they’re faithful and monogamous to their wives, they still are attracted to men, and at the moment they are happy, they say, because they’ve always wanted to be a parent and they have children. What happens sadly in these cases though, 20, 25 years into the marriage, after the kids grow up, they have a crisis, and they end up leaving their partner. And sadly I’ve met far too many people who are at that moment in their lives. The reality is people have been faking being straight for a very long time. You don’t need therapy or prayer to do that.
Q: When you were about 17 you became a born again Christian. Was that something that happened after you realised about your sexuality?

Oh yes. As a teenager I knew that I liked guys, and had sexual encounters with other boys, and felt a lot of conflict about that. Because I got the message, I got the memo, that this is bad, this is wrong. But I also had a genuine desire to know about God, to know about religious things, I had a sort of existential part of me that was coming alive as a teenager, so, on the one hand there was a genuine desire to get involved with religion, and to ask those deeper existential questions, and then there was also this desire to fix myself, and I thought well, maybe God could fix it, if it's so wrong, and apparently even God has a problem with it, and God is all powerful... it seemed like the logical step to make.

Q: How do you think that faith and sexuality can be reconciled?

I think they can be reconciled part by looking at history and seeing the many different roles that gender variant people have had in many religious traditions.

Q: This is something that you explore in your new play...

Right, about the transgendered bible characters. In other cultures, we see through archeology and anthropology that there have been spaces for queer people. And then often they’ve been the shamans and spiritual leaders of their communities. If you look at a Catholic priest, a minister, in a way it’s a transgender sort of role, because you have a man, typically, who is also a nurturer, who also is wearing a frock, you know, and that’s where they get their power from, from gender bending.

Q: How do people who are evangelical Christians react to your presentations?

Surprisingly positive. When I talk one on one to small groups of evangelical pastors, leaders, ex-gay leaders, some have come to my shows... they’re a bit surprised that I’m not an angry, anti-god gay. They assume that all gays are angry, bitter, and anti-religious. And um, and they’re drawn in, often because of this sincerity I have about my faith, and this sincere quest I was on to de-gay myself. And in the end they often concede the reality that I’ve done far more to address what I thought were sin issues in my life than they’ve ever done in their own lives. And I’ve had pastors in Scotland of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and other places say ‘how can I say you didn’t try hard enough’. And it creates a dilemma for them, because, they see that a: OK this didn’t work, but b: they recognise a person of faith who genuinely loves God and the bible and that’s sort of different from their concept of what a gay person can be.

“All of my most illicit sexual encounters took place when I was an ex-gay! And I don’t even know which one would be the most illicit, was it the in-flight sex that I had with an Italian on my way back from Chile...”
Q: Do you think sexuality is hardwired?

I think orientation is often hardwired. But I don’t think we are always as open to the wiring as we would think. I think there are far more many people who are bisexual than will admit to it. I think that there’s a lot of choice in the sort of sexual activities that we try and enjoy and experiment with and that’s great, it should be fun. I think that a lot of people can learn to love people that they’re not even necessarily attracted to. So much happens in a partnership that is not just the sex.

But similarly, so many people deny themselves certain types of sex, because of taboos that have come through the years that aren’t even rational. And sadly, even in the LGBT community there’s a lot of secretiveness. People may be polyamorous for instance, and they won’t come out about that because they feel they’ll be judged by some people. So there’s still a lot of closeted behaviour around sexuality, taboos, Victorian puritanical ideas about it, particularly in the US.

Q: What do you think the biggest taboos are?

I don’t really know, it’s different in every culture and subculture. Uh, you know, and fetishes have become so popular lately, some things that used to be crazy taboo, yeah it’s like foot fetish, now it’s like, ‘ah yeah, foot fetish, whatever people, I have no problem with it’. I think for gay men something that’s taboo is to date a transman. Uh, and I have dated transmen, and I really enjoyed those relationships, and they’ve been very rich and very full. There are gay men who draw a line. I think they’re denying themselves the opportunity to find a fabulous partner. I think people get too caught up with bits between our legs and forget that you’re falling in love with a person not their bits.

Q: So, what was your most illicit sexual encounter?

Oh my goodness, all of my most illicit sexual encounters took place when I was an ex-gay! And I don’t even know which one would be the most illicit, was it the in-flight sex that I had with an Italian on my way back from Chile, where I was doing missionary work? Was it the sex that I had with a Middle-Eastern taxi driver in New York on my way home to my wife, when I had back problems and couldn’t walk therefore had to take a taxi. Um, was it the time that I hooked up in the New York federal building with a Hasidic Jew? I don’t know, I couldn’t tell you, but all of these took place when I was desperately trying not to be gay, and as a result, I found myself putting myself in bizarre and at times very even dangerous places in order to get a sexual fix.

“The reality is people have been faking being straight for a very long time. You don’t need therapy or prayer to do that.”
Q: What was your lowest point on the programs?

When I was married, about four years into our marriage. We had sought counseling, tried to fix things, and had started a second round of not doing well. I knew I had two options.

I could leave my wife and start this whole other gay life, where I assumed that I'd get a disease and die and go to hell. Or jump in front of the subway train and kill myself. And for two weeks I stood on the subway platform in NY where I lived. I felt I had no other option; I'd rather be dead, in that point in my life, than to be gay. And that was the lowest and I fortunately I was able to reason myself out of that.

Probably the most exhilarating moment was the day of my marriage to a woman, because in our society for many people that's the greatest day of our lives, a huge celebration of one's heterosexuality, everyone comes together, gives fabulous gifts and praise, you're the centre of attention, and to me it was like I'd reached some tremendous goal, the American dream, and uh, and got the ultimate affirmation for it.

Q: In comparison, what's been your highest point since you've become an ex-ex-gay?

It was probably in June of 2007 when we had the ex-gay-survivor conference. This was an event where we brought together ex-gay survivors from all over the world, Australia, US, UK, Canada. We had this conference where we basically got together for the first time and I came up with this idea to have former Exodus ex-gay leaders issue a public apology. And I worked with them for a couple of weeks helping them to frame their apology, and they did. At the LA LGBT community centre, 3 former ex-gay leaders stood up and issued a public apology for promoting and providing ex-gay therapy. I felt so proud and pleased to see this culmination of the work that I'd been doing since 03, about telling my story, getting people together and building a movement, and it was also a moment where I felt I could begin to move on, because there were enough people interested and involved, that I didn't have to be addressing every ex-gay thing, I could go on and talk about gender and trans issues. I could be busy doing other sorts of work, I could move on and get beyond the ex-gay experience into the rest of my life.
The English language is constantly evolving. Whether it be to incorporate rapid advancements in technology (ipod, iphone, imac), faddish linguistic trends that emerge as quickly as they disappear ("wwaaaazzzzzup") or the positive or negative connotations words develop over time. Such a flux of values and meanings begs an important question: why have some words maintained a constant definition, whilst others have been so dramatically altered that they are almost unrecognisable when compared to their original meaning? More often than not, these semantic changes simply arise from quirks of the English language - and shifts in connotation are not designed to offend or alienate a specific group within society. Sometimes, however, they are. It is with this in mind that I aim to examine the history of the word ‘queer’ and its usage in contemporary society.

Originally, the word ‘queer’ did not denote non-normative sexuality, but rather something that was slightly strange or differed from the norm. The Second Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary states that the word queer originally derives from the Middle High German word ‘twer, meaning ‘cross’ or ‘oblique’. This edition defines the word queer as -

Adjective: 1a. Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character. Also, of questionable character, suspicious, dubious.
1b. Of a person (usually a man): homosexual. Hence, of things: pertaining to homosexuals or homosexuality. (United States origin)

Noun: A (usually male) homosexual. Also in combinations, as queer-bashing, the attacking of homosexuals; hence queer-basher. (Simpson and Weiner 1989: 1014)

Despite its original signification as odd or eccentric, ‘queer’ eventually became associated almost exclusively with non-normative sexuality. The term ‘queer’ acquired these new connotations at the turn of the twentieth century, and was restricted almost exclusively to male homosexual practices. However, during the Second World War its meaning was adapted to refer to masculine gay men.

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Reclaiming Queer

‘Queer’ has been fiercely debated over the last fifty years. Joe Brothwell examines the word’s controversial origins.

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Despite its original signification as odd or eccentric, ‘queer’ eventually became associated almost exclusively with non-normative sexuality. The term ‘queer’ acquired these new connotations at the turn of the twentieth century, and was restricted almost exclusively to male homosexual practices. However, during the Second World War its meaning was adapted to refer to masculine gay men who were sexually involved with other men. Within the gay scene the term ‘queer’ was used as a category of self-definition: it distinguished masculine men from ‘fairies’ (a term used to describe effeminate and flamboyant men). Interestingly, men who self-defined as ‘queer’ often directed a large amount of animosity towards men
they described as fairies. Although this distinction was widely evident within the gay (and closeted gay) community, during this period heterosexuals used ‘queer’ and ‘fairy’ interchangeably. The effect of this was to homogenize all men who engaged in sexual activity with other men, regardless of how masculine or feminine they were. From these origins, the term ‘queer’ has reached its current meaning, for better or worse, as a description for non-heterosexuals.

Due to its pejorative connotations, the use of ‘queer’ by those within the LGBT community is fiercely contested. Many feel that it has become so set in its meaning as an offensive term that it would be more effective to try and prevent the word from being used (both inside and outside the LGBT world). The counter-argument is that reclaiming the word ‘queer’ acts as a direct attack against homophobia. During the 1980s and 90s ‘queer’ was the most popular vernacular term of abuse for homosexuals; the argument runs that if the LGBT community were to adopt the word it would shake its pejorative implications. It has also been argued that ‘queer’ offers a viable alternative to the purportedly exclusionary ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’. It is argued that ‘queer’ can be used as an umbrella term which incorporates everyone related to the LGBT world. Instead of relying upon limited terminology, it is argued that using ‘queer’ in this way will welcome an array of sexualities and genders.

Clearly this debate is not likely to be settled in the near future. Even if a large enough proportion of the LGBT community are able to re-appropriate the term, it will still take time before its new meaning makes any sort of impact - if any - on the general meaning of the word ‘queer’. Researching this article has compelled me to forge my own opinions on the ongoing controversy, and I have this to say. Firstly, after analysing my character, and the words I would use to best define my traits, I thought about the words I would use to describe my sexuality. As a gay man, I would personally argue that although my sexuality does not define me or dictate who I am as person, it is certainly a part of who I am – and furthermore like my love of shitty reality TV shows or travelling or going to gigs, is not something I mind people knowing about. However, I am certainly aware that for lots of young people coming out as gay can be extremely frightening – a fear that I believe is heightened by anxieties about being branded by their sexuality. The reasons behind this are painfully clear: for a generation of young gay people, the negativity surrounding words such as ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ is more prominent than ever.

Over the past decade ‘gay’ has developed into a commonly used pejorative, becoming synonymous with anything that is generally negative (as in, “…that show’s gay, don’t watch it”, or “…these shoes are so gay, they really hurt my feet”). Therefore - even if only on a subconscious level - it is easy to understand why people might be uncomfortable about self-defining as ‘gay’, as the term has now become almost inseparable from its pejoration. Due to this I feel it is vital that we discover a term to describe sexuality that isn’t saturated with negative meanings. Will this be achieved by the reclamation of ‘queer’, or by the introduction of new terminology? Only time will tell.
DISSenting FROM Dissent
‘Queer’ is a term with the potential...

Lauren Young: why I don’t self-define as queer

...to provoke an array of emotions, not least from the non-heterosexual people it purports to refer to. Originally a term of homophobic disdain, it has now - supposedly - been reclaimed; it is used as a political act of self-definition for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and all shades in between. Despite this reclamation, queer still evokes negative connotations - a legacy of past usage, its move into the mainstream is not yet complete. Its fluidity as a concept is replicated in its fluidity of use, with even heterosexual people being able to self-identify as queer if they feel somehow marginalized within mainstream society.

Although a move away from the ‘straight-jacket’ labels ‘gay’, ‘straight’, ‘bisexual’ and so forth could be seen as a good thing, with views of sexuality as fluid assuming prominence, ‘queer’ is still a label. The emergence of queer theory suggests assumptions about a queer person’s political and ideological views may be made, leading others to perceive a queer identity as overly derivative from sexual orientation. Thus, the dichotomy between heterosexual and non-heterosexual is exaggerated, converse to the ethos of sexual orientation as just one aspect of a person. Queer is therefore constructed as a group identity - subsuming the various orientations, genders and interests of its members on the grounds of shared queerness.

On the basis of ‘strength in numbers’, the cohesion of LBGT culture under the more unifying term ‘queer’ appears to be a positive step; however, this is not the case. Differences between elements of the LBGT community are problematic for such theories of unification (transpeople, for example, may have different concerns to cisgender bisexuals). Lesbian identity is one example of possible eclipse by the queer movement. The struggle of lesbians to be recognised as fully capable of being sexually and romantically fulfilled without men, as well as asserting the dual identity of being a lesbian and a woman, is at risk of being effaced, as the term ‘queer’ does not explicitly acknowledge the differences between those who adopt it.

Self-defining as queer is automatically a politicising move. In doing so we invite new stereotypes and assumptions about ourselves, as well as to whom the word queer implicitly applies (whether or not they have consciously assumed it). Obviously, stereotyping occurs when one comes out as non-heterosexual or a non-normative gender. However, stereotypes associated with being queer are more likely to be because of the word itself, its history as a pejorative, its ambiguities and its connotations of political activism and admission of difference. In the extreme, this difference could be interpreted as a rejection of mainstream culture and its institutions, as they represent the oppressive heteronormative society that therefore needs to be changed.

In essence, being queer seems to have begun as a collective and inclusive term for the LGBT community. Now, however, it denotes not only sexual orientation but implicates someone’s entire identity, affiliations and needs. I personally do not self-define as queer as my sexual orientation is just one aspect of myself. I could just as usefully self-define as a woman, student, even rock music fan. However, just like my orientation, none of these are sufficient to determine my entire identity.
We catch up with last year’s CUSU LBGT President about living in Paris, Simone de Beauvoir, and food vs. sex.

Shereen Akhtar is a fire-snake in the Chinese calendar - lucky with money, happiest in childhood and most likely to suffer digestive and lower-back problems.

1: Do you self-define as queer?

Not really, it’s not a word with which I came into much contact growing up. And I don’t like the elongated vowel sound.

2: What is your fondest memory of being CUSU LBGT president?

Everything. I lived, worked and socialised gay, and it was one of the most liberating experiences of my life.

3: Why actually was it that it was changed from LGBT to LBGT?

Cambridge LGBT many years ago wanted their logo to read ‘Let’s Be Gay Together’ - hence LBGT instead of LGBT as you would normally find.

4: 4od or BBC iplayer?

Tough. BBC iPlayer, I think - astounding documentaries, slicker layout, and some good entertainment shows, though you have to look quite hard for them now.

5: What is the most interesting queer moment you have had in France?

Landing in Pigalle, home of the erotic cinema multiplex.

6: Do you read any French gay magazines? Which?

No, I try to get all my information online, but I have been known to read an issue or two of Tetu, which has surprisingly good political commentary.

7: Most inappropriate older woman crush?

Meryl Streep. 60 and still phenomenal.

8: If you ran a queer venue, what would it be and what would it be called?

I think it would be food-based. Perhaps a communal kitchen and dining table. “Heating it up?” “Hot hot hot?”...

9: What songs do you want played at your funeral?

I don’t know. Something lilting and peaceful. I would want my partner to choose.

11: Would you describe yourself as ‘normal’?

If normal means awesome, then yes.

12: Simone de Beauvoir or Virginia Woolf?

Simone de Beauvoir. She was one of my teenage idols when I was in college and doing my coursework on ‘Le Deuxième Sexe’.

13: Would you rather never enjoy food again or never enjoy sex again?

Food is fairly central in my life, but it’s enjoyment is mostly circumstantial. Picking food at the price of sex would probably blandify the whole experience, whereas I’m not sure the opposite is as true. Probably less risk of indigestion that way round, as well.
No bull.

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