

## CHAPTER 1

# QUEERING LANGUAGE

## Words and Worlds

The philosopher and writer Kenneth Burke once wrote, “A choice of words is a choice of worlds,” suggesting that not only is it through language that we make decisions about how to make sense of the worlds in which we live, but that we also actually use language to create the worlds themselves. He went on to describe human beings as “wordlings,” creatures whose beings and lives are dominated by the power and effects of language—and he extended this notion to include all kinds of symbol making, not just the verbal realm of words and sentences.

**Linguists**, scholars and professionals who study the structure, relationships, meanings, and uses of language, cast their nets wider than the intentional use of language to cause change or to conserve the status quo. Linguists are as interested in the aspects of language that occur in unconscious or even seemingly automatic ways, and how and why they work that way. Linguists are typically considered to be social scientists, using observational and experimental methods to produce knowledge and test hypotheses. In addition, linguists often divide their study between what they refer to as **diachronic** and **synchronic** perspectives. Diachronic linguistics looks at changes in language over the course of time, using historical methods of study; synchronic linguistics studies the use of language at a particular time. These two perspectives, we will find, are complementary rather than oppositional: both are helpful, but they focus on different aspects of the study of language. What is at stake in “queering language,” in terms of the words and worlds that are often chosen for or imposed on us? To answer that question requires that we begin with a word that itself has an interesting history (diachronic), as well as a complexity of meaning at any given moment (synchronic): queer.

### QUEER: WHAT’S IN A WORD?

One place to begin is with the language of the description and course title for which you are reading this book. Is it, perhaps, “LGBT Studies,” or,

alternatively, “GLBT Studies”? Maybe a longer set of letters — “LGBTQ” or “LGBTQA” or “LGBTQIA” — or something even longer? Is it yet another title, such as “Sexuality Studies” or “Sexual Minorities”? Which department or program offers the course? If it is Queer Studies, what expectations does the word *queer* create in you?

The word *queer* has an interesting history. Beginning with the history of the word (and its derivation, which is often referred to as its etymology) can help us situate, in a more in-depth way, the multiple meanings the word has and ways in which it is used in our own time. So, let us look at the earliest recorded uses of the words in the English language and then its changing meanings across time. The linguist Robin Brontsema has studied the word *queer* in some depth. She turns to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which traces the word back to the Middle High German word *twer*, which carries associations such as “cross” or “oblique,” suggesting qualities of “differentness” or “strangeness” (Brontsema, 2). Brontsema goes on to explain that “*queer*’s original significations did not denote nonnormative sexualities, but rather a nonnormativity from sexuality” (ibid.). It simply meant odd or strange.

Brontsema notes that the use of *queer* to mark nonheteronormative sexuality (as well as nonmonogamous heterosexual arrangements), began to develop in the early part of the twentieth century in the United States and the United Kingdom, though not in an exclusive way. She draws on the work of such historians as George Chauncey to map out the various terms that coexisted with *queer* and notes that, at different times, the word carried different denotative and connotative meanings. At some times, *queer* was a kind of umbrella term for those individuals and groups of people who practiced same-sex behaviors (even if they practiced opposite-sex behaviors as well), often pointing primarily to male homosexuals, in large part because women’s sexuality, of any kind, has been given less attention socially and historically.

Chauncey argues that historical evidence indicates that *queer* even marked a different set of characteristics within same-sex-centered communities of men. It was counterposed to the term *fairy*, which described not only a man who desired and practiced sex with other men, but also a way of expressing how that man acted in expressing his gender: *fairy* was frequently a term used to stigmatize men who acted in gender-nonconforming ways, who were considered “effeminate” or “womanly” (terms that today are contested or questionable). Among such men, *fairy* was saved for men who presented themselves in ways the society of the times considered “nonmasculine.”

The term **homosexual** has a similarly complex history. Historians of sexuality such as Michel Foucault argue that “the homosexual” as a stable, defined class of identity did not exist before the late nineteenth century,

when sexology emerged as an academic and scholarly field of study. Though there were equivalent words, such as **sodomite**, they were typically used to describe people who performed particular acts that were viewed by the society of the time as unnatural, and it was the behavior that was being described, not something that was part of the individual's essential character. But in the Victorian period and beyond (i.e., the middle of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth), the mutation from adjective to noun indicates a significant conceptual shift, a shift that marks an agreement among those who share a language that the concept has become a more defined state of being.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the word *queer* carried sexual connotations, though still in a fairly binary way: people either were or were not queer — that is, most people worked from the general assumption that one was attracted either to one's own sex or to the "opposite" one. (Bisexuality remained undertheorized, often consigned to such categories as "undecided" or "opportunistic," rather than as an authentic category of sexual identity.) While *homosexual* might be seen as the most "objective" term, social attitudes made the act of describing or calling someone a homosexual to be viewed as a negative, stigmatizing act. The word *homosexual* need not inherently be a negative descriptor, but, depending on how, when, where, and why it is used, it can have the effect of making a negative judgment about a person.

Moving back to our central term, *queer*, we can now consider how the word continues its historical evolution to the present day and how it functions in our own time. *Queer* remained a word used primarily in a negative way to describe people who participated in or who were assumed to practice homosexual behaviors and who were defined by them. Indeed, *queer*, like *homosexual*, became used as a noun, often in informal or casual contexts — as a kind of slang. One might suggest that it carried even more force than *homosexual*, both for people who used it as a slur or a derogation against other people and for people who identified as homosexual and who used it among other people with whom they shared this identity. For the former, *queer* was strictly negative, intended as a kind of verbal threat or wound; for the latter, the power of the word was more complex (as it is today).

Brontsema, as do other scholars, identifies yet another important shift in the use of *queer* as occurring around 1990, after the two decades following the Stonewall Riots, which happened in 1969 and are commonly considered to be a major moment in the emergence of what was then called the gay liberation movement, and about one decade into the AIDS epidemic. As a response to what many grassroots radicals viewed as repressive politics under President Ronald Reagan and the accompanying lack of action, including research, financial support, and public discourse, dealing with

the growing effects of HIV/AIDS (the virus was not discovered until 1983), a group calling itself Queer Nation formed in 1990. The formation and self-naming of this group are viewed as the first time a coalition of individuals who would have been labeled by society as “queer” (in the sexual sense) decided to take back the word from those individuals and groups who had more political, social, economic, and cultural power, and to use it as an act of self-determination and pride. This use of *queer* coincided with its introduction into scholarly and academic discourse, which is usually marked by Teresa de Lauretis’s coining of the phrase *queer theory* in an issue of the feminist journal *Differences*. *Queer* began to include those who practiced gender nonconformity and who inhabited trans identities. It is worth noting that this was accompanied by political tensions over the word, such as a resistance by some members of the organization Queer Nation to including trans identities as “citizens” of such a nation; a Transgender Nation caucus was formed within Queer Nation (Stryker 2008, 146).

Think about how even the very simple, economical phrase *Queer Nation* performs powerful work: we typically associate the word *nation* very strongly with legitimate citizenship, with belonging to a recognized group, occupying a cultural and, typically, geographic “space.” Yet, as the political scientist Benedict Anderson has suggested, in addition to these geographic territories (which have historically themselves been open to considerable contest and conflict, as we witness in the Middle East and elsewhere today), all nations are essentially and finally “imagined communities,” so that there is no reason that there cannot be a “queer nation,” populated by people who claim the word *queer* as central to who they are.

Just as we noted that the shift of *homosexual* from adjective to noun was an important linguistic movement, so is the expansion of *queer*, both in terms of its meaning and in its grammatical range as a signal of significant shifting of attitudes and views, consequential. With the advent of a more positive, empowering set of associations, and particularly with the development of queer theory and queer studies in the academy, the verb *to queer* has become one that has positive potential: it is often used to mean a process by which some phenomenon (a social event, an artistic text, a set of attitudes) is reevaluated and reread in ways that break down assumptions of what is “normal.” *To queer* something in a scholarly way means to look at the object of study through lenses that do not simply accept the givens we may have been taught or simply internalized.

*Queering* something in a scholarly way, then, may involve the sexual and gendered aspects of a phenomenon. Some critics have queered the television series *The Big Bang Theory* by shifting the focus from the heterosexual relationships at the center of the show to the nonheteronormative elements that can be seen in it, such as the character Amy’s crush on her

friend Penny, the “bromance” between Raj and Howard, and the possible asexuality (in early seasons) of Sheldon. Sheldon’s resistance to any sexuality made some viewers label him as asexual, itself a queer position. The introduction of Amy as a girlfriend and then fiancée and wife can be seen as a “normatizing” move (though their sex life is anything but “normative”). Queering gender has similarly occurred in stage traditions. Shakespeare’s plays (especially his comedies, such as *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*) are doubly queered, as the female roles were played by adolescent male actors because women were not permitted on the stage. More recently, male actors, particularly those of a certain age, have enjoyed playing Oscar Wilde’s “dragon-like” prudish female character, Lady Bracknell, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which suggests the “female masculinity” of this aggressive Victorian matriarch. J. M. Barrie specified that the title character in his classic *Peter Pan* was to be played by a female actor; interestingly, perhaps the most famous actor to play Peter Pan was the musical comedy star Mary Martin, who won a Tony and performed the role three times on live television, and who always stated that it was her favorite role. Martin’s stage personae varied, from the hyperfeminine Venus in *One Touch of Venus* to the ultimately normative, though initially tomboyish, Maria von Trapp in *The Sound of Music*, both on Broadway. Biographers have long speculated that Martin herself was either lesbian or bisexual; it may be that her pleasure in playing Peter was the freedom it allowed her to explore her own sense of gender nonconformity, which, in the mid-twentieth century, could be revealed only as part of stage performances.

But queering need not necessarily be overtly or even unconsciously sexual in its content. To choose another example from popular culture, there have been many scholarly attempts to queer the Harry Potter books (and films), long before their author, J. K. Rowling, declared that the beloved headmaster Dumbledore was gay. Some cultural commentators suggested that this series’ phenomenal popularity had to do with the ways in which it queered both the traditional school story and the experience of adolescence itself. Though there is no homosexuality overtly present in the stories, they depict an alternative world, different from the one the rest of us “Muggles” exist in, a world in which there is power in being different or, to use the language of queer theory, “nonnormative.” Which “houses” at Hogwarts seemed more queer than others to you, and why?

Recall that Brontsema began her own etymological analysis by noting that the root word *twer* did not have sexual connotations, and that *queer* came to carry widespread sexual associations only in the last century and a half. It would seem that we are now in a place and time where the sexual is once again not a necessary aspect of the word’s connotations or use. Some might argue that, even in those instances in which sexual nonnormativity

is not explicitly intended, we cannot ever return to a “prehistorical” use of the word, that its identification with a minoritized experience or identity, and one that is associated with the erotic or romantic, will always be somewhere underneath — that the word will always have a “sexiness” about it.

The last aspect we might consider about the word *queer* is what might be considered both political and ethical and falls into the arena of what Brontsema calls “linguistic reclamation.” Brontsema argues that the “reclamation of *queer* has been largely fragmented, limitedly accepted, and highly contested” (5). She proceeds to suggest a set of perspectives through which to view the debate over whether it is politically efficacious and ethically warranted to reclaim *queer* and make the decision in a conscious and mindful way to give it an accepted place in public discourse. She starts with the seemingly simple binary opposition of positions on this question: “reclamation opposed” versus “reclamation supported” — the former standing for a belief that the word should not be used, the latter that it should be. Note that the word *reclamation* is central to this pairing — as is the case with any parallel speech acts, much may depend on who is performing the action.

Brontsema argues that the simple binary of “opposed-supported” is insufficient to allow us to have useful and intelligent conversations about what is at stake in such “linguistic reclamations.” So she expands the terms of the issue by adding a second set of variables to the binary: “pejoration inseparable” and “pejoration separable.” By *pejoration* she means the use of the term in a negative or disparaging way. She proceeds to identify and describe different permutations produced by juxtaposing the “opposed-supported” binary and the “separable-inseparable” binary regarding the word *queer*.

Perhaps the most interesting possibilities are in the less intuitive prospect: that the pejoration is inseparable from the word and that, nonetheless or even because this is the case, there can be good reasons to support reclaiming it. Brontsema summarizes the logic behind this position in terms that get at a particular kind of political stance, both about language and about historical awareness: such a perspective in a sense embraces a history of resistance and ongoing struggle against oppression and wears this condition as a badge of pride. Calling oneself queer, talking about an affinity group as queers, calling on citizens to queer marriage or the military (or any other traditionally normative activity or group) become acts that simultaneously assert a newly acquired and ongoing movement for power, while honoring and acknowledging both the past and present views and acts that would devalue and disempower queers.

An example of how *queer* may both include *trans* and enable it for some individuals comes from the transgender historian Susan Stryker, who writes: “I named myself queer in 1990. . . . The term allowed me to align myself with other antiheteronormative identities and sociopolitical

formations without erasing the specificity of my sense of self or the practices I engage to perform myself for others. By becoming queer first, I found I could then become transsexual in a way I had not previously considered" (Stryker 1998, 151). This is an example of how *queer* became a kind of ideological "gateway" to *trans* for Stryker — and then may be seen as also acknowledging a possible place in *queer* for *trans*, or at least an overlap between the two.

Brontsema concludes by acknowledging that we need to keep in mind some thus-far neglected parts of the issue. First, there are (and perhaps always will be, though we cannot say for sure, of course) what she calls "non-queer gays and lesbians," by which she means homosexual people (we will address the sometimes-thorny issues in these terms in the next section of this chapter) who choose not to use *queer* for myriad reasons and whom self-described queers may also not wish to include under the term *queer* (which they may reserve, as Brontsema suggests, for a specific set of political attitudes and actions). She also cautions us to consider the ways in which the word *queer* has been used (and continues to be) as a form of **hate speech**, in which the speaking or writing of the word is intended to cause harm or to threaten. Though she notes this possibility, she finally asserts that hate speech succeeds only if the intended objects allow themselves to be victims of it. If one chooses not to use *queer*, she suggests, it should not be as a result of fear that others will once again usurp its power. Do you think she is right about this?

## LGBTQIA+: ALPHABET SOUP OR LITTLE BOXES?

Certainly, the use of the word *queer* to refer to all people who stand outside normative conceptions of sexual and gender identity, desire, and behavior has distinct advantages in its inclusiveness. That inclusiveness may at the same time be criticized by some as its very weakness. A way to understand the possible pitfalls of *queer* as an inclusive term may be understood through the idea of the **ladder of abstraction**, a concept advanced by the scholar S. I. Hayakawa, who theorized that people move, linguistically and cognitively, up and down levels (like rungs on a ladder) of words that are either more or less abstract and, therefore, represent a concept in more mental or more concrete terms:

**Level Four:** Abstractions

**Level Three:** Noun classes: broad groups

**Level Two:** Noun categories: more definite groups

**Level One:** Specific, identifiable nouns

One could argue that the word *queer* has moved, at different times and in different contexts, from Level Four (simply understood to mean “strange” or “different”) to the other levels. If *queer* is used to refer to all people whose sexual lives and identities are nonnormative, perhaps we are using the word in a Level Three sense. If we narrow the meaning of *queer* to refer only to sexuality centered on same-sex interactions or desires, we are probably even farther down, on Level Two. Level One might be a very specific individual’s way of understanding their sexuality or gender, or, as suggested in the previous section, might require that the same-sex association or gender nonconformity be tied to a radical, left-wing politics.

This section, then, focuses on language—specifically, words and phrases that name groups, that move in ways more typically specific in their meaning than *queer*, keeping in mind the varied uses of *queer* discussed above (some more abstract, some perhaps more specific than some of the words discussed below). We start by unraveling the code of each letter of our “queer alphabet.”

### **Gay: All-Purpose Word or Gender Specific?**

The word **gay** has a long and often unclear history in the language of sexuality and sexual identity. Like the word *queer*, it has had and continues to have meanings that are entirely unassociated with sexual identity. If you consult dictionaries (including online ones), you will discover that virtually all of them now include *homosexual* as one of the accepted definitions, sometimes with the qualification that it is often used specifically to refer to male homosexuals. In some dictionaries, it is the first definition, which often suggests what the lexicographer considers to be the most common or frequent meaning in use at the time of the publication of the dictionary. It is not the case that the positioning of a definition in a list in a dictionary carries any prescriptive dimensions: that is, the first definition given is not intended to be the “correct” one or even the “preferred” one

The *Oxford English Dictionary* once again helps us trace the historical lineage of the word. The first three definitions focus on nonsexual meanings of the word. Only in definition no. 4 is a sexual quality introduced. The first definition under this subheading is “wanton, lewd, lascivious,” followed by the abbreviation *Obs.*, meaning obsolete, or no longer used (the first examples of this usage date to the fifteenth century). Definition number 4c, which immediately precedes the definition of *gay* as homosexual is “of a woman: living by prostitution. Of a place: serving as a brothel” ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)).

Indeed, if you read writing from the eighteenth century up to some decades in the twentieth, you will find this usage, without any implication of homosexuality. To be a “gay girl” was to be a prostitute. The British word for a man (usually a young man) who either performed homosexual behaviors

or did “women’s work” was *molly*, and molly houses were houses of prostitution where men could hire such young men, who sometimes (but not always) dressed in female clothing, for sexual purposes. This word was always considered a form of slang, the informal and everyday language of social life. When used in this sense today, it almost always is in reference to the past or to a historical setting: one finds it in novels meant to evoke the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The word *gay* as a specifically homosexual term is first noted by the *OED* as having been in print in a short story by Gertrude Stein. In a sketch called “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene,” published in 1922, Stein writes a thinly veiled story about two women she knew. The editors of the *OED* qualify this first instance of the use of the word *gay* to mean homosexual, saying, “It is likely that, although there may be innuendo in some cases, these have been interpreted anachronistically in the light either of the context, . . . or of knowledge about an author’s sexuality” ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)). Nonetheless, read the following brief excerpt from the piece (the story is now in the public domain and can be found in multiple places online), and consider how the repetition of the word starts to become a signifier (a word or symbol) of an ongoing relationship between the title characters: “They stayed there and were gay there, not very gay there, just gay there. They were both gay there, they were regularly working there both of them cultivating their voices there, they were both gay there. Georgine Skeene was gay there and she was regular, regular in being gay, regular in not being gay, regular in being a gay one who was one not being gay longer than was needed to be one being quite a gay one. They were both gay then there and both working there then” ([www.gutenberg.org/files/33403/33403-h/33403-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33403/33403-h/33403-h.htm)).

The word *gay* as an accepted, commonly understood synonym for homosexual truly emerged for the larger public in the period after the Stonewall Riots, in part because of the emergence of political organizations such as the Gay Liberation Front and the use by those affiliated with such groups claiming the word *gay* as their identity term of choice. It quickly replaced *homosexual* in the language of people identifying as having same-sex desire as a more positive term and one less clinical (i.e., scientific, medically pathologizing) than *homosexual*. There certainly was resistance in various corners to the word *gay*. Some nonhomosexual people asserted that a minority group had somehow appropriated a word that the dissenters viewed as more “innocent” and nonsexual. Conversely, a small but vocal minority of homosexual people suggested that the adoption of *gay* as a synonym for *homosexual* trivialized the significance of sexual orientation and the historical and political oppression of people who struggled for rights and acceptance. One could say that they, too, might have been too close in time to see that the word would become less strongly associated

with the frivolous and take on a primary meaning of *homosexual*, thus demonstrating the power of a group of people to use and change language.

One complication many scholars and cultural commentators have noted is that in recent decades there has been a kind of “restigmatizing” use of the word, particularly among adolescent males, as in the cliché “Dude, that’s so gay!” in which the word *gay* means stupid, corny, uncool. We suspect many speakers who use the word in this way may be unconscious of the ways in which this redefinition may well once again, however unintentionally, reinforce negative attitudes toward gay people.

One of the ways in which we continue to observe the ever-changing nature of language is in the spreading of uses of the word *gay*. Some people use the word as a noun: the contemporary stand-up comic Kathy Griffin often refers in her performances to “her gays,” explaining that she views gay people (men, in particular) with great love, admiration, and support. Her actions generally support this self-characterization: she has been an outspoken heterosexually identified advocate for marriage equality and for admission to the military of LGBTQ+ people. But, some would suggest, the turning of an adjective into a noun (parallels might be “the blacks,” or “the disabled”) tends to reduce people to a single characteristic.

It is interesting to note that, in twentieth- and twenty-first-century English, there is no single, commonly used noun to identify homosexual men. Since *gay* did have an earlier association with criminalized sexual behaviors (prostitution), some think its association with homosexuality derives from the connection, perceived or real, between female prostitutes and young homosexual men (mollies) both of whom were paid for providing sexual services outside the law. It has also been suggested that *gay* as a term for homosexual men derived from the hobo culture of late nineteenth-century America, in which “gay-cats” were young vagrant men who traveled the country picking up short-term work and often begging for food, shelter, or money, and often attaching themselves to older men “on the bum,” as it was colloquially known, and who often either offered sexual services in return for protection or were abused sexually and physically by older men ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)).

Those who oppose the use of the word *gay* as a universal term for all homosexual people argue that it is no less sexist than the universal “he,” which, up until the last half century, was considered the appropriate word to use as the singular form for all people. Therefore, many people prefer to use *gay* primarily as a marker of male homosexuality, though there are women who prefer *gay woman* to *lesbian*. When talking about all people who identify as homosexual, the phrase *gay men and lesbians* or *lesbians and gay men* (the question of order will be addressed below) seems preferable for those people who are not comfortable, for whatever reason, with the word *queer*.

## Lesbian: Going Back to Ancient Greece to Coin a Modern Word

The word **lesbian** is clearly at Level Two on Hayakawa's ladder of abstraction—it is always more specific, restricted to women who identify as homosexual or who identify with homosexual women (the term that emerged from what is called second-wave feminism, that of the 1960s into the 1980s, up to the advent of queer theory, perhaps, is often “women-identified women”). Men have no claim on this word, though issues regarding transgender language and experience have called even that restriction into question (as well as what we mean by *men*). Some radical feminists assert that transgender women are actually men, on the basis of both biological and social histories, and they argue against the inclusion of such people in lesbian separatist spaces, such as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and women-only communities.

The word *lesbian* has an ancient history, harkening back to the Greek island of Lesbos, where the first female lyric poet whose work survives, a woman named Sappho, lived and wrote. We have primarily only fragments of Sappho's personal poetry, but scholars have noted in them and in what has been able to be pieced together about Sappho's life that her erotic attractions were directed to both women and men. In modern terms, she might be described as bisexual, but because the word *lesbian* was coined in the late 1800s by English writers to describe erotic and romantic relationships between women, the term is now used principally to provide a category for women whose primary, often exclusive sexual identity is homosexual. Interestingly, ancient Greek had a word, *lesbiazein*, a word used to describe behavior that involved “‘sexual initiative and shamelessness’ among women” ([www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)), but it was not used exclusively to denote same-sex relationships.

More recent feminist and lesbian writers have called for a more complex consideration of the term *lesbian*, with interesting and thought-provoking implications, not only for queering language, but for many aspects of the lives of women, homosexual or otherwise. In 1980 the poet and essayist Adrienne Rich wrote an essay she called “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in which she argued for lesbianism as an extension of feminism. Rich, who had been married to a man before coming out and living the rest of her life as a lesbian, suggested that the privileging of heterosexuality as not only the norm but also as a more desirable identity needed to be challenged and that, therefore, it would be politically and personally useful for all women to remove themselves from men and to form some kind of lesbian relationship or have a lesbian experience, even if they identified primarily as heterosexual and even if they returned to a heterosexual coupled arrangement. This was a reaction to what she described as *compulsory heterosexuality*, which she claimed consisted of assumptions

and ways of policing thought and behavior that made all people (men and women) value and feel coerced into aspiring to heterosexuality as “better” than other kinds of sexuality.

She suggested that the word *lesbian* as a noun be done away with, arguing that its clinical connotations limited its liberatory value. In its place, she preferred such terms as **lesbian existence** and **lesbian continuum**, the latter of which was meant to map out a space where all women, regardless of their desires or typical sexual practices, might place themselves in women-identified worlds—thus, to hark back to Burke, the words would allow women to choose their worlds. A motto attributed to the lesbian-feminist thinker Ti-Grace Atkinson sums up the thesis nicely: “Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice.”

Rich later clarified that she intended her earlier essay not as a broadside arguing either for doing away with heterosexuality or for suggesting that it was in any essential way less valid a sexual identity or experience than lesbian existence; rather, she wished her readers to consider doing what is sometimes called reversing figure and ground. Society, particularly at that time, took heterosexuality so much for granted as the given, and she wanted to encourage her readers to reconsider and imagine a world in which the figure might be viewed in a different, less commanding position. Rich’s idea of a lesbian continuum became a very helpful and powerful *heuristic*, a method by which individuals and communities might discover unexpected or unconscious assumptions and possibilities for themselves.

Some feminists of the period described themselves as “political lesbians,” typically meaning that though their erotic and romantic attractions were, either exclusively or primarily, for members of the opposite sex, they felt themselves intellectually, politically, and morally in alignment with the goals and practices of lesbian activism. As is true of any complex term, *political lesbian* had and has its detractors, seen by some as co-opting a term of identity by otherwise heterosexual (and, hence, typically more privileged in general) women.

### **Bisexual: Both/And — Reinforcing Binaries or Expanding beyond Them?**

In the nineteenth century, as the science of biology became more sophisticated, expanded, and standardized, the word **bisexual** entered the lexicon of English usage. Initially, it referred to organisms (typically plants and nonhuman animals) that possessed biological characteristics of male and female members of the species, and such “bisexuality” was a typical occurrence, rather than an anomaly in such species.

It was only in the twentieth century that the word came to have a consistent, commonly accepted meaning in language about human beings and

their sexual identities, desires, and behaviors. It was used and continues to be used to categorize humans who describe themselves as having erotic or romantic (or both) attraction to members of their own sex as well as to those they view as belonging to the opposite sex. The very construction of the word has led to confusion, sometimes quite inaccurate assumptions, and often stigmatizing attitudes toward people who either claim the word as their identity or who are described as such by others.

It is *bi-* that may cause some confusion or resistance. In its broadest sense, *bi-* simply means “two.” *Bisexual*, then, in the language of sexual identity, has the literal meaning of describing an individual who is attracted to “both” sexes. Myriad questions can arise for people who identify outside bisexual experience, some of which have rightly been viewed as contributing to *biphobism*, a suspicion of, misunderstanding of, or antagonism toward people who identify as bisexual. Is a bisexual person someone who must be *equally* attracted to men and women? Can such people ever have a truly and satisfying monogamous relationship — are they always in a state of desiring experiences with people from multiple sexual categories? Is bisexuality simply a form of deception, whether of the self or the other, perhaps because of stigmas against homosexuality? Can someone who describes their sexual desire as “bi” nonetheless feel more romantic about one gender over the other? Note that the implicit binary of *bi-* is what may cause some people difficulties in understanding and lead them to stigmatizing or to what is often called “bi erasure,” either ignoring or questioning the authenticity of the existence and value of people who identify as such.

There is a growing use of *pansexual* by people who wish to identify as not being exclusively attracted to one sex or the other. One advantage to *pansexual* is that it also opens up a space for the inclusion of trans desires — desires either of people who identify as trans and whose attractions may not map as easily on preexisting categories, or of people who are attracted to trans people as a category of possible sexual or romantic partners.

### **T: From Transvestite/Transsexual to T+/T\***

The prefix *trans-* is from the Latin for “across.” It is used in almost every area of life, nature, and technology and does not carry any inherent sexual sense. It is interesting, then, that it has become one of the most hotly debated and highly contested terms in current discourse about sexuality and gender identity. The first use of a word associated with it is **transvestite**, which has typically been defined as a person who dresses in the clothes traditionally associated with the opposite sex. The next word to emerge using *trans-* in a sense associated with sex and sexual identity was **transsexual**: both terms were coined by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who worked in the early twentieth century. While individuals who have described the

experience of feeling themselves born into a wrongly sexed body have clearly been in the world throughout history, and we have documentation of at least one surgery performed for the purpose of sexual reassignment as early as 1930, the term seems to have come into more common usage in the 1950s. With the development and expansion of sex-reassignment surgeries, the word *transsexualism* came to refer to the psychological state of feeling one has an inappropriate match between body and sexual identity and *transsexual* to individuals who had undergone some form of sex-reassignment surgery (also referred to as gender-affirming surgery today).

As social theorists and social scientists began to draw significant distinctions between the concept of sex as a biological category and gender as a sociocultural one, both of these *trans-* terms began to be subjected to greater scrutiny. Indeed, biologists such as Anne Fausto-Sterling, author of *Myths of Gender*, and psychologists such as Cordelia Fine, author of *Delusions of Gender*, challenge such neat distinctions. The more widely used term today is **transgender**, which attempts to cast a wide net in the way that the words *queer* and, in some cases, *gay* do. It was popularized by the writer and activist Leslie Feinberg to avoid and replace language that came out of a medical and psychopathologizing model of identity and experience. In a sense, *transgender* as a construction aims to underscore the wide variety of individual differences and experiences that may profitably be viewed in a kind of multivoiced dialogue with each other.

Two very recent attempts to link the multiplicity of experiences captured by some of the terms above are **trans\*** and **trans+**. The rhetoric of these terms is one of inclusiveness and diversity. The asterisk (\*) comes from computer/digital culture, in which the \* serves to tell a search engine to look for all occurrences of what has preceded the symbol: thus, “trans\*” symbolically calls on a range of possible positions on a spectrum of sexual diversity for inclusion, respect, and authenticity. The + sign is also used sometimes, and it, too, seems to be mathematical in its symbolic significance, suggesting an ongoing, perhaps infinite set of possibilities.

An important point to keep in mind is that, while to those who live outside the transgender experience, there is sometimes an assumption that all transgender people wish to undergo surgery or surgeries or other forms of medical treatment to align their physical bodies more closely to traditional assumptions about maleness or femaleness (what many people mean when they use *man* or *woman* in anatomical terms), this equation of “trans” with “transsexual” is no longer as dominant as it once was. For some people who identify as transgender, what is at issue is not a desire to change their bodies, either surgically or hormonally, but to be permitted to live openly and with full rights in the gender they claim as their authentic one. So, just as there are many ways to experience oneself as gay, straight, bisexual, and

so forth, so there is a wide variety of experiencing the self in personally positive ways as either transgender or cisgender (a term to be defined in the next paragraph). Just as people with disabilities often avoid a discourse of “wrongness” or “defect,” but focus on social barriers to personal and collective agency and self-worth, the same can be true for transgender people: it is not the body that is “wrong,” but society’s views, treatment, and, often, regulation of the body (and the wholeness of the person who inhabits the body).

Another terminological development of comparatively recent coinage is **cisgender** (sometimes abbreviated in common speech as *cis*). It is derived from the Latin root *cis-*, which may be translated as “on this side” or, more helpfully for our purposes, “same as” or “aligned with.” The term (or some variation of it, such as *cissexual*) has been in limited use since the late 1990s, but it began to gain more widespread currency during the first decade of the twenty-first century (though it is still less familiar to most people than the term *transgender*). It is used to distinguish between people who identify as transgender and those who experience the gender they were assigned at birth as an accurate and appropriate representation of who they feel themselves to be. It has probably taken longer for the term to be recognized because it names the “unmarked” category: that is, it is fair to say that considerably more people identify as cisgender than as transgender. *Cisgender* still generates some degree of controversy among some people, who oppose it because they see it as a term imposed on them by those outside the group (presumably trans people). Of course, there are many terms that have been developed to label or name people by those outside the group, so this opposition seems more likely to be the product of either transphobia or a perceived loss of linguistic power. And, just as Freud famously said that heterosexuality needed as much explanation as homosexuality, it is useful and important to have a word that specifies the experience of those who identify with the gender assigned at birth as much as it is to have one for those who do not. Otherwise, the unmarked category remains, whether people intend it to or not, the dominant, assumed status of normativity.

### **Q: Questioning and/or Queer**

LGBT has, for some time, been the alphabetic string most often found in writings about nonnormative sexuality that address relationships between sexual identities beyond a single category. Some add the letter Q to the list. The Q can have two meanings, depending on the intention of the speaker or writer and the implicit or explicit understanding of the audience. When first introduced to the alphabetic string, it was used most often to stand for **questioning**, people who were questioning their sexual identity, particularly their sexual orientation. The term was used and the symbol included

in order to provide a space, both conceptually and associationally, for such individuals, perhaps even to provide them with a safeness, to invite them in to explore their status of “not-yet-knowing” without making them feel that they somehow had to choose or declare themselves.

The other and more recent use of *Q* is for *queer*. In some respects, this use may initially seem to be redundant, since *queer* is frequently, perhaps even primarily, used these days to be as broad a term as possible. Nonetheless, those who would include the *Q* to mean queer offer the reasonable counterargument that *queer* need not necessarily involve same-sex behaviors or orientations, and that it therefore has a place in addition to, rather than as a replacement for, the other letters of identity. Sometimes *Q* is repeated in such an abbreviation, as in *LGBTQQ*. In those cases, it is probably safe to assume that whoever is using the abbreviation wants to include both *questioning* and *queer* as part of the grouping.

### **I: Intersex — From Hermaphrodite to DSD**

There is a growing inclusion of the letter *I* in the alphabetic string of symbols. It almost universally refers to people who identify as **intersex**, a person who either has genitals associated with both men and women or ambiguous ones (or other related medical conditions that make identification of a single biological sex difficult or arbitrary, or genetic variations from xx-xy binary). In general, people who identify as intersex are conscious of their anomalies (to use the formal medical language) or become aware later in life that they were born with or developed such anomalies. Some of these individuals were (and still are) subjected to surgical interventions, often when still in infancy, to “correct” such anomalies. The term that preceded intersex was **hermaphrodite**, drawn from Greek mythology, after the character Hermaphroditus, the son of the gods Aphrodite and Hermes, who was born a boy but was united with the water nymph (spirit) Salmacis, into a two-sexed being. Because the word *hermaphrodite* has a history of associations with freak shows and monstrosity, the use of word to describe modern-day individuals is much less common than it once was.

It is important to keep in mind that intersex people are as varied and diverse in their physical, psychological, and social experiences as other populations. It is not simply the case that intersex people have all the genitalia of both men and women; some might not present as being that different from people with the “normal” genitalia of one sex or another. We will have more to say about the complexities of intersex people and their lives in chapter 4.

The use of the *I* in the acronym is an interesting one, in that some of the most significant leaders in activism in terms of this identity, such as Cheryl Chase, who founded the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA)

in 1993, have moved away from the term *intersex* and have instead suggested the phrase *Differences of Sexual Development* or *Disorders of Sex Developments*, more clinical-sounding terms, abbreviated as *DSD*. There remains considerable controversy over this newer name, as critics suggest that it once again symbolically and, perhaps quite materially, gives power not to the individuals but to parents and especially to medical personnel.

### A: Allies and A-'s

Up until the last few years, if *A* was included, it was understood to stand for allies, those individuals and groups of people who, while not identifying as other than heterosexual themselves, viewed themselves as supporters and advocates, friends and often families of people whose sexuality was labeled as nonheteronormative. The inclusion of the *A* in this sense was to acknowledge and honor the coalitions between queer folk and non-queer folk (or to suggest a kind of "political queerness," analogous to "political lesbianism") and to demonstrate the value of and role of such people in social and political battles. One might conjecture that such inclusion serves a number of possible functions and may derive from some historical events and processes. First, by including this *A*, people working in identity politics and social movements can broaden the potential membership — a far journey from the closeted gatherings that of necessity marked earlier periods in history: this became especially critical in political and care-providing aspects of the AIDS epidemic, when non-queer people stepped up alongside queer people.

In more recent times, the *A* has had an alternative meaning, and it may well be that it is becoming more prominent than the "allies" one. It might be useful to think of an *A* spectrum (not to be confused with a parallel "autism spectrum"): a cluster of ways of participating in and naming an experience of one's sexual or romantic identity: **asexual**, **aromantic**, and **agender**. In the case of these words, the *a-* prefix refers, as it does in other areas, to an absence of the characteristic or experience (or some relative self-reported position on a continuum). Thus, people on this spectrum may identify as having no sexual attraction to any other person of any gender; such individuals *may* report romantic (nonerotic) feelings toward other people, either of their own sex or of another. Aromantic people report never having feelings of romantic love for others; they may report having sexual feelings, and they may describe other kinds of love (such as familial, friendship that qualifies as love, and so forth). Agender people describe themselves as not having a sense of themselves as either male or female (or masculine or feminine); they may be different from people who would describe themselves as **androgynous**, people who report a sense of self as both male and female, or masculine and feminine. (The sets of terms, once kept separate to distinguish between sex and gender, now often are

used interchangeably, and not always consistently.) Some of these people prefer the term **nonbinary** (or a variant of it), to describe their sense of gender — that theirs is not an absence of gender, but a sense of gender that does not fit into any either-or description.

### Sequence May Matter

Depending on when material you are reading or viewing was produced, you may find the string *GLBT*, *LGBT*, or some other variation (including omission of one or more letters). Similarly, phrases such as *gay and lesbian* and *lesbian and gay* are often used synonymously to refer to the same populations. Historically, *gay and lesbian* and *GL* were first most widely used, some would argue because of alphabetic order, others because they viewed *gay* as the umbrella term. With the emergence and spread of feminism (especially lesbian feminism), activists and theorists began to question the political and communicative meaning of “ordering” the terms. As an attempt to address historical inequities between men and women, many individuals and groups began to reverse the order, opting for *lesbian and gay* and *LG* (as well as *LGB* and *LGBT* and so forth). By doing so, such groups are making a statement of the importance of always keeping women’s issues and experiences and identities present in the cultural and activist work of people affiliated by same-sex desires. A group not choosing to begin with *lesbian* or *L* should not be perceived as diminishing women’s lives, however; such a choice is rarely meant to imply a hierarchy of negative valuation.

## QUEER LANGUAGE AND THE SPEAKING OF THE WORLD: SOME PRAGMATIC ISSUES

### “Gayvoice” and “Gaydar”: Do They Exist and What Might They Be?

The term **gayvoice** (or *gay voice*) is used to describe certain qualities of speech performed by gay men, often in either a humorous or a scornful way, depending on who is doing the describing and what the context is. Many gay men, in particular, insist that there is a particular way of speaking, unique to gay men, and that the presence of such a voice is “proof positive” that the speaker can be identified as gay. This, in turn, also may lead some people to insist that they possess something they call a **gaydar** — an ability to spot gay persons at first contact: sometimes this gaydar is attributed to voice; other times, it is read nonverbally, through movements, gestures, even clothing. (Recently, scientists at Stanford University claimed they could program a computer to recognize gay male faces, a study that is controversial and critiqued.) Though there has been some research on the voices of lesbians, there are far less data and less agreement on what might constitute a “lesbian voice.”

Consider popular culture and media representations of gay men. Think about such situation comedies as *Will and Grace*, *Modern Family*, and *Looking*. Are some characters depicted as having more gayvoice than others? Is it ever a topic characters discuss—either the gay men or those around them? How do characters talk about the voices of gay men? Is voice sometimes a way a character suspected of being gay is identified? For example, *Will and Grace*, which was first broadcast on NBC from 1998 to 2006 (and which returned to follow its characters in 2017), featured as ongoing characters two gay men, Will Truman and his sidekick, Jack McFarland. Initially, the premise of the series was that Will was the more serious and responsible gay man: a high-achieving lawyer and, probably not coincidentally, a man who could, if and when necessary, pass for straight (heterosexual). Jack, on the other hand, in the tradition of supporting sidekicks, was more cartoonlike, the zany next-door neighbor, somewhat childlike and irresponsible, never seeming to have a way of supporting himself. Watch an episode or two. Do their voices reflect these different social, psychological, and economic positions?

There has been comparatively little empirical scientific study of the phenomenon of gayvoice, and what there is tends to be based on small samples, drawn from limited, often fairly homogeneous subject groups. The design of the studies that have been done (Gaudio; Moonwoman-Baird) dates back to the 1990s. Because language acquisition and development combine biological and sociocultural dimensions, if there were a gayvoice identifiable from the research in the 1990s, we might expect it to have some consistency across time, but also to have the ability, like all features of language, to change over time for communities of speakers.

Earlier linguists of gender wondered if gayvoice (our term, not theirs) might be gendered in the sense of gay men imitating or unconsciously internalizing speech patterns associated with women (McConnell-Ginet). Subsequent research does not seem to bear this out, based on those patterns of intonation, pitch, range, and rate socially associated with female voices. Perhaps it works the other way around: because there has often been an assumption that gay men are like women, their speech patterns and vocalizations have been interpreted as “feminine.”

So what are some of the characteristics often associated by nonlinguists with gayvoice? On the basis of the studies done and anecdotal reports by self-identified gay men, they might include some of the following:

1. wider range of intonation than typical in men in general
2. sometimes higher habitual pitch range (*habitual* here refers to the range that feels most comfortable for the speaker)

3. elongation (stretching) of vowels and diphthongs (sometimes to the point of making vowels into two different vowel sounds)
4. hypernasality of vowels (i.e., speaking them through the nose more than is usual for most speakers, particularly male speakers)
5. dentalization (placing the tongue against the teeth to make certain sounds, which are usually made by placing the tongue against the front part of the hard palate or roof of the mouth, often done by what is called "tongue thrusting," pushing the tongue farther forward than most speakers place it — sounds like t and d, sh and zh)

These are perhaps the most audible and recognizable sounds that are often considered part of gayvoice. Of course, even if we were able to generalize, the question might remain: How do gay men "acquire" this way of speaking? Is it innate, or a product of early socialization — exposure to gayvoice, either in everyday life or from the media?

It is difficult to make a good argument for the innateness of gayvoice, without larger databases of voices and without consideration of what gayvoice might sound like in different languages. Similarly, specialists in child acquisition of language do not believe that mere exposure to certain linguistic behaviors necessarily makes a child imitate the behavior. If a male child learns gayvoice through exposure, it is probably not because he is gay and the example has pulled the "true" speech out of him; it seems more likely that he finds the person he is seeing and hearing interesting and that that person provides a positive example of what interests him.

The director David Thorpe has made a documentary film about the very subject, called *Do I Sound Gay?* (2015). Thorpe, building on his own discomfort with "sounding gay," interviewed many gay men about their voices; he talked to speech therapists who indicated that they have clients come to them, wanting help in getting rid of gayvoice, and to cultural commentators such as Dan Savage, who spoke about the politics and social significance of what is at stake in this issue. For gay men and for those who either support or denigrate them, gayvoice may be as serious an issue as a regional dialect in terms of identification with a group or assumptions made about those groups by outsiders.

Throughout a long part of the twentieth century and continuing in some professions and regions today, students interested in entering media broadcasting as a profession were counseled to take courses or lessons in "accent reduction" and to acquire what was called "standard American speech." This is less common today, though strong accents are still "marked" in the media as nonnormative. As there are more and more visible (and audible) queer-identified broadcasters (they may use the terms *gay* and *lesbian*),

such as Anderson Cooper, Don Lemon, Rachel Maddow, Philip Rucker, and Robin Roberts, who all identify at some point on the LGBTQ+ spectrum and embody diversity of race, gender, ethnicity, and social class, stereotypes may begin to weaken and elements of gayvoice of any particular media figure may simply not matter as much. There has not been any sustained scholarly or popular discussion about gayvoice in other languages or in the media performances of broadcasters in other languages, though there certainly are some openly queer broadcasters in other cultures and languages.

### **Code-Switching and Slang: Speaking with Your “People”**

Slang is the language of everyday life. Traditionally, the term has been used to mark linguistic practices that occur outside formal contexts, such as school, the business world, and public places where more standardized language use is either expected or in some cases required. Slang can be a socially and politically controversial topic as well. In particular, people disagree about when and where slang is appropriate, who is entitled to use specific forms of slang associated with or referring to different groups, and what the implications of the use of slang are for social justice and progress — the last might be called the political ethics of slang. Two groups concerned about the use of slang, particularly terms historically used to denigrate minority members or people with less social and political power, are African Americans and women of all races. The use of in-group terms continues to be hotly debated. Like members of these two groups, queer people have both used slang and been the subject of use of slang by others, slang that is specific to the lives, characters, experiences, and valuing or devaluing of queer people.

Are such terms ever acceptable — even when used with intended “affection” by one group member for another? Some gay men find the use of *fag* or *queen* acceptable in a closed-group situation, understanding the term as a kind of insider form of parody or knowledge; other gay men find such terms oppressive and detrimental to the use of language that acknowledges both the historical oppression of gay men and offers more positive possibilities for queer experience. The same is true for lesbians, who may use a term like *dyke* as a way of signaling toughness and strength in the face of oppression, both by heteronormative and patriarchal elements of society; others may find the term offensive. This is also true within groups of transgender people: some may find the use of the word *tranny* (sometimes spelled *trannie*) offensive, both in its casualness and its use of the diminutive; others see it as an insider term, reclaimed as a sign of defiance and strength.

Queer people have also come up with coded phrases and language to communicate with each other that do not, at least on the surface, seem to

carry stigma with them. Linguists have a term, **code-switching**, that is used to describe the practice of moving back and forth between the formal, more widely shared language used in settings such as business and school and the language (which may be thought of as a dialect) used at home or with other members of a cultural community, usually one that does not have the same social power as the dominant language. Queer people often engage in code-switching as well, sometimes at the level of word substitutions, but often in terms of other language features. A queer person may use the dominant (sometimes also called *unmarked*) language in an office meeting, and then go back to his office and call another queer person, such as a friend or partner or even another queer coworker, and the prosodic elements (the sense of intonation, pitch, and “melody”) of their speech, as well as some of their words and phrases may change dramatically. For many queer people, code-switching not only is a pleasurable language practice on its own terms (private language often has a sense of play and of secret knowledge that is enjoyable for its own sake), but has been and continues to be a form of survival, both in professional worlds, and in everyday lives, where certain terms and interactions can be made safer and more successful by such linguistic strategies.

Queer folk have found ways of integrating normative phrases into “code-switching” contexts for purposes of inclusion and identification. When two queer people are trying to communicate about a third person, who may not be present, one may say, “He (or she) is *family*,” a safer way of passing along the message that the third party is queer: this may be the case if the third person is not *out of the closet* (or not universally so, if one ever can claim to be universally “out”) or if the situation in which the statement is made is one where it is unclear whether more directly queer identification is safe, either for the third person or for the speakers exchanging the information. In gender-specific contexts, gay men during the 1960s through 1980s sometimes would refer to another gay man as a “friend of Dorothy,” a euphemism for saying the man was gay—the origins of this phrase are still discussed, but some argue that *Dorothy* is meant to evoke the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, and Dorothy’s friends were the three outcasts who became heroes (the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion); others associate Dorothy with the actress-singer Judy Garland, who played the role and who was (and remains) for many gay men a cultural icon. “Sings in the choir” is similarly used, more for gay men, but at times for lesbians. This phrase may originate in the stereotype that queer people are “artistic”; it may also have connections with the presence of queer people in church choirs in black churches. Such terms rarely have a single point of origin. How they came to mean what they mean and that they change over time are what is important.

Though discussions of code-switching tend to focus on verbal language, it is important to remember that nonverbal communication accounts for the vast majority of interaction between people and the perceptions they make. This affects all queer people, but especially trans people, and particularly those who describe themselves or are described by others as *non-passing* (not able or not choosing to be perceived in their new or affirmed gender) or those who identify as nonbinary. Such individuals may have to engage in complex physical, kinesthetic, or other performative forms of code-switching in order to gain access to such areas as airport checkpoints or restrooms or other spaces or occasions when there is heightened scrutiny of identity, especially categorical identity such as gender, race, or age.

## SPOTLIGHT ON HISTORY: TALKING POLARI WITH JULIAN "AND MY FRIEND, SANDY"

The phenomenon of **Polari** is a fascinating case study in how communities of queer people developed a variety of language, one that had currency among gay men in Britain during a certain historical period when open discussion of queer lives was not always safe. Paul Baker, its premiere scholar, defines it as “a secret language mainly used by gay men and lesbians, in London and other UK cities with an established gay subculture, in the first 70 or so years of the twentieth century” (1). An interesting term he uses to describe Polari is as an “anti-language” (13), suggesting that one of the functions of it as a speech code was to maintain some degree of secrecy from those outside the subculture of its primary speakers. He traces it back even further to traditions of Cant, “secret code language used by criminals in the sixteenth to eighteenth century” (16).

The word *Polari* is believed to have been derived from the earlier word *Parlyaree*, itself connected to the Italian verb *parlare*, to speak. Baker traces its origins to traveling actors, who often felt the need to speak in codes as a form of self-protection, in some cases because actors and all theater people were viewed in various historical periods as disreputable and not to be trusted. Early on, it drew its lexicon (vocabulary) from various Romance languages (such as Italian, French, and Spanish), as well as from the language of the Romani people (often referred to, disparagingly and inaccurately, as gypsies), from Cockney (the dialect and slang used by people raised in or living in the East End of London, traditionally a low-income area), which often involved rhyming phrases that stood in place for a more obvious or transparent word, and from language used by sailors (perhaps because sailors, like actors, traveled quite a bit, frequented pubs and brothels, and were sometimes viewed as sexually flexible in terms of choice of partners). Baker notes that later in the twentieth century, Polari also introduced words drawn

from Jewish cultures, particularly Yiddish, the everyday language of many Jewish people and one that was commonly found in music halls and vaudeville, and in the 1960s from the emerging drug culture. While Baker suggests that, by the time he was doing his primary research in the 1990s, Polari had generally died out as an ongoing language, he notes that in the late 1990s he was aware of a form of speech called Klub Polari, spoken among people who frequented dance clubs, which were heavily populated by queer people. Baker has written that he saw Klub Polari less as a development of the older Polari per se, and more as a kind of rebirth of interest in the traditions and history of Polari.

If you want to hear and see Polari in practice, there are nonetheless still some rich places to experience it. The musician Morrissey, usually identified as queer (he has declared himself as attracted neither to men nor to women, but to humans), recorded an album that he titled *Bona Drag*, which, in Polari, translates as “nice outfit” (*bona* meaning nice or good and *drag*, probably familiar to you as clothing, but often used specifically to refer to a costume or gender-nonconforming outfit); on that album, he performs a song called “Piccadilly Palare” in this language. (It is available on YouTube and other online sources.) The 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*, set in the glam-rock British club scene of the 1970s, features a scene performed in Polari, and a British novel, *Sucking Sherbet Lemons* by Michael Carson, published in 1988 but set in the 1960s, tells the story of the coming out of a gay, Catholic boy and features Polari.

Polari became popular among people outside queer circles in the 1960s by way of a popular radio show produced and broadcast by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), *Round the Horne*, a weekly series. It was a comedy-variety show, named after the popular comedian Kenneth Horne. One of the sketches was a visit from a pair of characters named Julian and Sandy. Horne would play “straight man” to Julian and Sandy, who were, in the context of the sketch, inseparable friends, though never described as lovers — in fact, in the last episode of the show, they were revealed to be married to women, a turnabout of expectations calculated to produce a laugh.

Julian would speak first, saying, “I’m Julian and this is my friend Sandy.” The sketch, whose setting would vary from week to week, would usually involve Horne walking into some kind of business establishment (a bookstore, a travel agency) run by Julian and Sandy, who would use the occasion to speak to Horne in Polari, and occasionally, in order to make a pun, Horne would use a word from Polari, or a word that would have a different meaning in Polari. Julian and Sandy spoke rapidly, as any native speakers of a language might, but, because they were played by actors, they knew how to use timing, emphasis, and pauses to make the jokes understandable for the presumably non-Polari-fluent listeners.

The code-switching we identified as part of queer speech during this period was evident in virtually all of the Julian and Sandy sketches. To a non-insider listener, Julian and Sandy would seem like two silly, friendly, and harmless men, perhaps “poofs,” to use the British slang of the time. Such listeners might enjoy the sketches for their wit and often low humor — the writers and actors were smart enough to realize that the broad audience of the BBC Radio would not want anything that graphically described queer sexual acts (or any overt sexual acts of any kind, given the times), but they found ways to distinguish the proper (though not always too proper) Mr. Horne from the pair.

Baker suggests that, in a twist of irony, it may be that it was the very popularity of the Julian and Sandy broadcasts that began to erode the actual everyday use of Polari by queer folk. Polari functioned for its non-theatrical speakers as a language of shared, often closeted identities. As a broader audience began to understand some of the most frequently used words and conventions of Polari, its usefulness as an underground language began to wane. It showed up at a funeral service for the queer filmmaker and activist Derek Jarman, who was one of the leaders in what was called the New Queer Cinema, which pushed boundaries of what and how queer life, bodies, and experiences could be depicted on film; his was one of the most publicly acknowledged, openly identified deaths from AIDS. At the memorial service for Jarman, a radical guerilla (street) theater performance group, which called itself the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence — they were queer-identified men dressed as nuns, though they often sported facial hair, thus making no effort to disguise their male bodily characteristics or to pass as female — substituted Polari for the traditional Latin sections of the Mass (Jarman was an atheist). This performance was referred to as the Canonization of St. Derek, as it appropriated the rituals and terms of Catholicism for queer purposes. To the people for whom Jarman served as a “holy figure,” Polari was a symbol of the underground, transgressive culture to which he belonged (Lucas).

Baker has written a book on Polari, *Polari — The Lost Language of Gay Men*, which you might find interesting to read if you are intrigued by the more elaborate vocabulary and linguistic conventions of Polari. Ian Lucas, who wrote an insightful analysis of the Jarman Mass for an anthology of scholarly writings in queer linguistics, includes what he calls “A Simple Polari Glossary” (92–93). Here are a few selections from that glossary.

<i>beancove</i>	young queen
<i>bingey</i>	penis
<i>bona</i>	good

<i>bona nochey</i>	good night
<i>cackle</i>	gossip
<i>cant</i>	talk
<i>charver</i>	to have sex
<i>cottage</i>	public toilet
<i>cove</i>	friend, "mate"
<i>dolly</i>	dear
<i>EEK</i>	face
<i>lally</i>	leg
<i>mince</i>	walk effeminately
<i>moey</i>	money
<i>multi</i>	many
<i>mungaree</i>	food
<i>naff</i>	uninteresting (also, "straight")
<i>nanty</i>	not, none, negative
<i>omie</i>	man
<i>omiepalone</i>	homosexual
<i>palone</i>	woman
<i>parlary</i>	to talk in Polari
<i>peroney</i>	for each one
<i>riah</i>	hair
<i>stampers</i>	shoes
<i>thews</i>	arms
<i>trade</i>	sexual partner
<i>troll</i>	to walk, look for trade
<i>varda</i>	to look
<i>yews</i>	eyes

Some are exaggerations drawn from physical acts (cackle for gossip); some are built through a process called *backslanging*, in which a new word is made by a reversal of the traditional spelling or pronunciation of a word (*riah* for "hair"); some are derived from other languages (*bona nochey* for "good night," derived from Spanish's *buenas noches*), some share an initial

letter (*lallies* for “legs”), and so forth. And a few remain current in queer language today: *trade* still means a sexual partner, though, for most people who use the word, it refers to a non-gay-identified man who is willing (often for money) to engage in sexual acts with another man. *Troll* as a verb can still serve as the equivalent of “cruising,” or looking for sex (once upon a time, *trolling* was often associated with strolling or driving through public places, trying to spot possible sexual partners; today, it may be the case that more trolling is done online). *Troll* has become a noun, which, in queer language, usually refers to an older man, often trying to find a younger man for sexual acts; it has expanded in digital culture to refer to people who post on various blogs or other chat sites with the intent to cause trouble or fool people.

## CONCLUSION

Needless to say, we have only scratched the surface of the possibilities of queering language. Language is one of the defining characteristics of what it means to be human and is constantly evolving, as speakers change and needs and contexts for communication alter and develop over time and space. It is, in the terms of philosopher Paul Grice, based on an implicit “cooperative principle,” by which speakers learn what information to include, how much to include, when to stop speaking, and so forth. As Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall suggest, the performative nature of language means that words and larger speech acts “do not merely describe the world, but change it” (491). Language is not only how we know or describe ourselves, others, and the worlds around them, but it is how we *make* ourselves, each other, and our worlds. How we make ourselves — or are made into ourselves by those people and forces that surround us — is the subject of Part II of this book: those sets of ideas, theories, concepts, and acts that we place under the larger area of *identity*.

## ISSUES FOR INVESTIGATION

### 1. Hierarchies of Terms

Make a list of as many different terms you can think of that are used to label people as queer (or LGBTQ+, if those divisions are more manageable for you at this point). Once you have this basic list, divide it into different categories of people — perhaps on the basis of gender (are there some words that are specific to gay men, some to gay women, some to transgender women, some to transgender men?), assumed sexual practices (oral, anal, other), gender expression (not simply whether your assumption about a person is that they are male or female, but *how* they present themselves in

gendered ways to the world), tastes, hobbies, professions, activities (such as “opera queen” for a gay man who loves opera, “diesel dyke,” sometimes associated with women who work in traditionally male jobs, though now expanded to a more general category of gender expression). Share these lists with your fellow students. Discuss when and where people in your group have heard these words used (or used them themselves). Who has used them and for what reason? What was the effect of the communication act — was the use commented on or challenged? Was it an insider or outsider use of slang?

Then try your hand at ranking the slang terms and phrases. Though this is highly subjective and often quite context-specific, it may be useful to try to order the terms on a continuum from *totally acceptable* to *totally unacceptable*, realizing that context may play a role in where on such a continuum you might place a term. Or you might use the categories from *extremely offensive* to *not offensive at all* as your continuum. Discuss where you place each word or phrase and why. Do not be surprised if there is considerable disagreement among group members — there is no single right or wrong answer to these questions. The point is to try to excavate what is underneath these uses of slang.

Below are some common (and not-so-common) terms and phrases associated with queer people, either emerging from the way queer people talk about and among themselves or emerging from language used by non-queer people about queer people. We have divided them into a number of categories. Compare them to your own:

### *General (men, women, and trans people)*

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queer	homo	gay	perv
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### *Men only*

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faggot (also fag)	fairy fruit	cocksucker	
bugger	queen	pansy	poof
nance	butt boy	bear	twink
mary	swish	chicken	otter
chickenhawk	shirt lifter	fudge packer	girl (sometimes “gurl”)
sister (sissy)	sod (from sodomy)	molly	nance (Nancy)

### *Women only*

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dyke (bulldyke)	bulldagger	lesbo (lezbo/lezzie)	butch
muff diver	rug muncher (carpet muncher)	tom	

LUG

(lesbian until graduation — women only)

### *Bisexual men and women*

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switch hitter	AC/DC	heteroflexible (usually for men)
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### *Trans*

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tranny	trans man	trans woman	genderqueer
nonbinary	boi	Two-Spirit	FTM
M2F	MTF	F2M	MTN
MTX	FTN	FTX	

We have intentionally included some that are no longer in current use and some that are more specific to particular English-speaking countries or regions. Are there any that are new to you? (You can find their meaning and history on the Internet and in other resources.) Do you have any to add to the list?

## **2. Speaking and Learning Polari**

Working from the selected glossary provided above, see if you can come up with a sentence (or, if you are brave, a conversation) using Polari. While the list provided means your performance would of necessity be a mix of Polari and standard English, see what levels of connotation and nuance the introduction of such coded language achieves. Search the Internet for examples of spoken Polari — there is a short film available that shows two (presumably) gay men in a public park using Polari to communicate; it is called *Putting on the Dish* and can be found on a number of sites. There is a widely available clip that shows queer men in the club scene in the film *Velvet Goldmine*. YouTube and other sites have selections from the recordings made of the “Julian and Sandy” routines, and an anthology of them is available on CD. If you are especially ambitious, you may wish to read Baker’s book to attain higher proficiency in Polari.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

*Do I Sound Gay?* Directed by David Thorpe. Sundance, 2015.

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Zimman, Lal, Jenny Davis, and Joshua Raclaw, eds. *Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.