



Roundtable Review: Queer/ing Book History. SHARP: Moving Texts. 2021.

Poring over card catalogues? Check. Feeling oddly compelled by titles, cover copy or illustrations? Check. Scrutinising author photographs and biographies, publishers' colophons and blurbs? It's just going to come right out and say it. Queer readers are closet book historians. For much of the last century and the early years of the present one, a necessarily partial, subjective canon of queer literature could only be strung together by tenacious readers willing to follow such tenuous, coded threads of connection, which depend as much on material books and their paratexts as on their content.^[1] "Before love," as Valerie Rohy puts it, "there was the library; before intimacy, before identity, before community, there were books."^[2] But although the links between sexuality and textuality are well-rehearsed, the scholarly fields of book history and bibliography have been somewhat slower to accommodate queer theories, methods and pedagogies.

The Queer/ing Book History roundtable, which took place on 28 July 2021, midway through SHARP 2021, "Moving Texts", set out to explore the rich entangled relationship between queer history and book history. Expertly facilitated by Cait Coker (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), with technical support from the SHARP 2021 organising team, the session focused both on the histories of queer books and publishing and on the methods and methodologies we might employ in order to queer the field itself.

[Javier Samper Vendrell](#) and [Vance Byrd](#) (Grinnell College) have collaborated on an edited collection, *Queer Print Cultures*, forthcoming with the University of Toronto Press in 2022. The essays they have assembled, interdisciplinary and global in scope, explore the alternative venues in which queer and other marginalised people have documented and archived their lives over the past two centuries: miscellanies, friendship albums, classified ads and zines. They ask about what has historically been excluded from library collections, but also how such repositories function as spaces of resistance. Moving further into queer-as-method, [Kadin Henningsen](#) (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) introduced his trans literary history of nineteenth-century American literature and print culture, suggesting how we might queer analytic and descriptive bibliography. Aesthetic and material norms, he argues, relating to book-binding, typography and paper, inform essentialist ideas about gender and sexuality: the ideal book conforms to the "ideal" body. [Ela Przybylo](#) (Illinois State) brought some of these concerns into a discussion of contemporary scholarly publishing, questioning how we can queer institutional norms and practices "such as peer review" in order to make them more equitable and caring. All panellists emphasised the importance of an intersectional approach to queer book history; a recognition of queer theory's past whiteness and a refusal to focus on queerness at

the expense of other forms of difference. Through her work on the radical, collectively run, open-access journal [Feral Feminisms](#), Ela is both investigating and enacting the queer, feminist, decolonial and antiracist histories and futures of publishing, and incorporating them into her teaching.

Tempting Zoom-fatigued participants into breakout rooms on the third long day of an international conference is no mean feat, but conversation in my group was lively and, judging from the chat afterwards, participants in parallel discussions were similarly enthused by the opportunity to talk between ourselves and delve deeper into the preoccupations of the panel. We were asked to consider the relationship between queer history and book history: is there a shadow book history that is queer? How do we queer book history? And what methods and methodologies might be needed for doing so? Attention to queer reading and book histories, we agreed, allows for an unsettling of tired narratives around queer literary experience, refocusing attention on reading and book use as embodied, situated and social. From our earliest experiences of trying to find ourselves in media “including in print” LGBTQ2IA+ individuals are employing queer methods and grappling with the ways in which queer identities might be “read” by others. As the organisers pointed out, the work of queer/ing book history is already taking place, “in the shadows and at the margins”: LGBTQ2IA+ people “throughout history and across geographical locations have utilized the book arts towards building community, visibility, and social change”.

Something of this cross-disciplinary community is being created in international book history circles, too. This session aside, Brooke Palmieri’s London Rare Books School course, *The Queer Book*, running at the [Institute of English Studies](#) since 2018 “and Brooke’s writing, thinking and speaking in general” was vociferously praised by panellists and participants alike as catalysing for a range of queer book historical work by academics, librarians, archivists, printers and book arts practitioners. This diversity was also a strength of this roundtable. As Cait noted in the chat, bringing librarians into conversations like this is unfortunately more of a rarity than it should be. It’s clear, however, that librarians’ and archivists’ expertise is essential for ensuring queer inclusion in bibliographies and catalogues, for “minding the gaps” in existing and future collections, and for understanding and repairing the legacies of previous exclusionary practices.

If this generative [Twitter](#) thread, sparked by Rebecca Baumann in late 2020 “and if the hum in the Zoom room during this session” is anything to go by, there’s a real hunger to talk and think further about the constellation of queerness and books, the disciplinary strictures of book history and bibliography, and our various approaches to researching and teaching in these areas. It’s an open, speculative field, driven by some of the same political and affective energies as kindred work on feminist bibliography, liberation bibliography, and antiracist and decolonial approaches to book history. But when queer as mode or method is still omitted from recent scholarly work in reading studies or book history (such as Leah Price and Matthew Rubery’s otherwise excellent edited collection *Further Reading*, published by Oxford University Press in 2020) the silences and gaps this roundtable sought in part to identify seem uncomfortably close at hand. Making space to discuss these issues at SHARP 2021 was not only welcome, but in keeping with the overriding preoccupations of the week: a commitment to inclusivity, accessibility and social justice from organisers and participants alike; important conversations about reparative scholarly and archival work; a willingness to think seriously about dismantling normative ideologies.

In talking to LGBTQ2IA+ people about their relationship with books and literature, a common formulation is repeated. It was “as if I had always known the definition; now I knew the term”.

explains one reader, after looking up the word “homosexuality” in the dictionary for the first time. [3] An oral history interviewee tells me that in first coming across a fictional representation of lesbian desire, she “read about something which I hadn’t been able to articulate before, but already knew about.” [4] In reaching towards a book history that is queer in both subject and method, I feel something of the same tentative, hopeful, just-putting-into-words; a new articulation of something felt and understood, which we are learning together how to handle.

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[1] Philip Kennicott, “Smuggler: A Memoir of Gay Male Literature,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2014, vqronline.org/memoir-articles/2014/10/smuggler, n. pag. For selected further examples, see Lee Lynch, “Cruising the Libraries” in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, edited by Joanne Glasgow and Karla Jay, Onlywomen Press, 1992, pp. 39-48; Alison Hennegan, “On Becoming a Lesbian Reader,” in *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction*, edited by Susannah Radstone, Lawrence and Wishart, 1988, pp. 165-190; Kathleen Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction: The Sexually Intrepid World of Lesbian Paperback Novels 1950-1965*, Cleis Press, 2005; and Kath Weston, “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration,” *GLQ*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1995, pp. 253-277.

[2] Valerie Rohy, *Lost Causes: Narrative, Etiology and Queer Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 104.

[3] Weston 1995, p. 258.

[4] Oral history interview by Sarah Pyke, *Textual Preferences Archive*, 9 February 2015.

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