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At the Edges of Queer:

Navigating Ambiguity in Identity, Community, and Politics

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Senior Thesis

Oberlin College Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies Department

At the Edges of Queer: Navigating Ambiguity in Identity, Community, and Politics

When *queer* took the world of AIDS activism and the academy by storm in the late 20th century, activists and academics leapt to understand and define this reclaimed word and predict its trajectory. Some academics claimed that *queer* would avoid obsolescence, remaining an anti-assimilationist beacon for activists, while others worried that lumping anyone with non-normative sexualities or lifestyle practices under the same umbrella would inaccurately homogenize disparate groups and detract from specific causes. This study aims to understand the meanings of the word *queer* among students at Oberlin College today, over a quarter century after the beginning of the word's reclamation. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, I asked 17 non-heterosexual or non-cisgender students to describe their relationships with and perceptions of the word *queer* at their college and in other places they've lived, keeping this question at the core of my research: How are Oberlin College students using *queer* today, and how do uses of this word impact and interact with the ways in which Oberlin students conceive of identity, community, and politics? I interviewed several Case Western Reserve University students to better understand how current uses of *queer* in Oberlin are particular to this time and place. My findings indicate that *queer's* multiple meanings as an identity term and a synonym of non-normative cause it to occupy a position of tension as a simultaneously fixed and relational term. *Queer's* ambiguity can render it both hopeful and ineffective as a community unifier or political beacon, but the contradictions people encounter at the boundaries of the word allow *queer* to remain salient as a term that embodies the ever-shifting challenges of people marginalized because of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: identity, language, gender and sexual minorities

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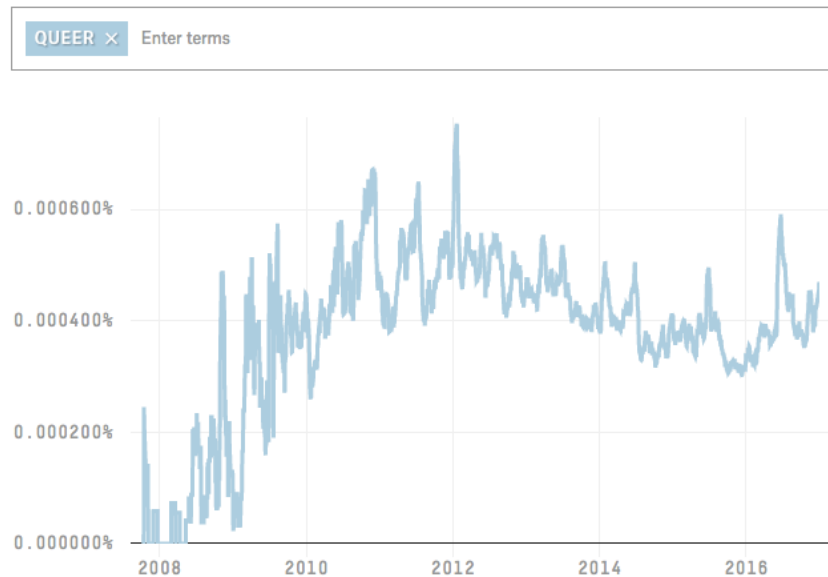
PREFACE

I came to this project through navigating the discovery of my academic interests and my own sexual orientation and gender identity. I had barely heard of *queer* as a reclaimed identity term before coming to Oberlin, but once I arrived on campus, I heard it everywhere. I noticed discrepancies between academic and colloquial uses of *queer* and wondered how other Oberlin students grappled with the tensions I perceived within the word. Simultaneously, I was in the process of questioning my own sexual orientation and gender identity, and came to identify as queer because it was the only word that allowed me to put my constant self-scrutiny (am I gay? Am I bi? Am I cis? Am I trans?) to rest. Now, after several years of happily overthinking about *queer* from an analytical perspective, I have no idea how I'd answer most of my own opinion-based interview questions about politics, community, and the future of *queer*. I continue to identify as *queer* for the same initial reason: for the importance of making peace with my own complexities, and the simplicity of using one word instead of several paragraphs to describe my gender and sexuality. This paper is neither a love letter for *queer* nor hate mail, but rather an investigation into how it means what it means (or implies), its possibilities and limitations, and why this one word continues to matter so much for so many of us—despite (or because of) the endless disagreements.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-sixteen was a big year for *queer*. The Huffington Post, a liberal news and blogging site, changed the name of its “Gay Voices” section to “Queer Voices.” A multitude of online opinion articles on the word *queer* appeared, sporting titles like “7 Reasons I Use ‘Queer’ Instead of Lesbian” (M 2016) and “The Problem With the Word ‘Queer’”(Segal 2016). During the 2016 presidential race, candidate Donald Trump said he would work to protect “LGBTQ people,” surprising many activists with his inclusion of “Q” in the acronym (Landsbaum 2016).

This surge in the use of *queer* online is not new, but a growing trend within the past decade. The proliferation of articles about *queer* and the frequent inclusion of a “Q” for *queer* at the end of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) acronym points to the increasing cultural relevance of the term *queer*. An analysis of Reddit users’ uses of the word *queer* over time indicate a surge in the word’s use on the social news and discussion website beginning in 2008 (Olson and King 2016). This surge was followed by a plateau of usage between 2011 and 2016, with a slight dip in usage between 2013 and 2015. Overall, Reddit users’ relationship with *queer* moved from very little to no use during 2008 to stable and relatively frequent use from 2010 through 2016.



Although this analysis of Reddit data does not account for trends of word use across the entire Internet, trends of *queer*'s use on this popular website align with increases in the use of *queer* on many other blogging and news sites.

Beyond the sheer use of the word *queer*, it is the numerous debates on left-leaning websites about how, why, where, and if *queer* should be used that capture my attention. Many people have numerous opinions about whether or not *queer* has (or should have) political implications, who should be allowed to claim *queer*, whether or not *queer* could or should overtake LGBT as an umbrella term, and countless others. Some major organizations, such as PFLAG, GLAAD, and the Human Rights Campaign, now include definitions of *queer* and statements explaining why the organization has taken up *queer*.

This project captures a cultural moment in which *queer* is on the cusp of becoming more mainstream as a reclaimed word online and in certain places across the U.S., just as LGBT people are grappling with the simultaneous gain and loss of rights, access, and visibility for different groups within the umbrella. The repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell in 2010 allowed gay

people to openly serve in the U.S. army, the *Obergefell v. Hodges* supreme court case legalized same-sex marriage nationwide in 2015, and the availability of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) on the market starting in 2012 provides highly effective protection against HIV/AIDS. These changes allow gay people to have similar lifestyles to straight people, despite the struggles that many non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people still experience on a daily basis.

The emergence of mainstream gay rights organizations in the late 1990s and early 2000s has resulted in a push for LGBT causes that operate from a framework of assimilationism—the goal being that gay people can live as much like straight people as possible. These cultural shifts lead me to ask: as *queer* becomes more popular as an identity term, and assimilationist gay politics become more normalized, what is the role of *queer* within political dialogues, as a term that has signaled non-normativity and anti-assimilationism in the past? When a “Q” is added onto the end of “LGBT,” is queer normalized, or is LGBT queered?

Additionally, *queer* has made room for more recently acknowledged identities that fall outside of the letters of the LGBT acronym, such as non-binary genders. Beyond *queer's* political implications as non-normative, *queer* now an important term for people whose genders and sexualities can't be called by any other, more specific word. *Queer's* role as an umbrella term and a personal identifier for an expanding community leads me to ask: is *queer* more a political stance or more an identity term describing gender identity or sexual orientation? Can it be both, and if so, how? What are the consequences and prospects of *queer's* broadness and ambiguity?

In order to address these questions, I wanted to ask people how they felt about *queer* and how they heard and used it in their daily lives. Throughout the course of this paper, I analyze

comments from interviewees and put them in conversation with one another to tease out how and why *queer* espouses the contradictions and possibilities that it does.

Many academics have hinted at or described the ways in which people use *queer* colloquially, but few have asked people who identify as or might be labeled as *queer* how they feel about the word and what they observe about its use within their own communities. I felt that talking with people within a specific community would be one of the best possible ways to understand the ways in which *queer* is used among members of that community in their everyday lives, as well as the problems it resolves, creates, and perpetuates. I focus this study on Oberlin College, which serves as an interesting case study because *queer* at Oberlin is used almost exclusively in a reclaimed sense as an identity label and a word indicating non-normativity, and is used very frequently.

My research question asked, how are Oberlin College students using *queer*, and how do uses of this word impact and interact with the ways Oberlin students conceive of identity, community, and politics? My goal, more specifically, was to understand the usage rules of *queer* at Oberlin, and the ways in which participants make sense of the boundaries and possibilities that emerge from a broad identity label with multiple and varying connotations. My method of data collection involved in-depth, individual interviews with 15 Oberlin students and 2 Case Western Reserve University students. This paper primarily focuses on the perspectives of Oberlin students.

My interviews produced four main findings, which are linked through a core trend underlying explicit and implicit uses of *queer* at Oberlin. My findings indicate that *queer*'s dual meanings as an identity label for non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender people and a synonym of non-normative cause it to occupy a position of tension as a simultaneously fixed and relational

term. The broadness of *queer* as an identity term and the tension *queer* contains through its dual definitions facilitate both the disagreements and possibilities that arise in the term's relationship to identity, politics, and community.

Chapter 1 details participants' interpretations of *queer's* explicit definitions at Oberlin. Chapters 2 and 3 examine implicit connotations of *queer* as they relate to politics and community, considering debates and tensions that arise based on the implications of the definitions noted within Chapter 1. Chapter 4 explores the contextually specific factors that shape uses of *queer* in Oberlin and other places in the U.S. The four findings I articulate in these sections are as follows:

1) DEFINING QUEER: *Queer* has two main definitions at Oberlin. It means non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender, as well as non-normative. This first section covers the explicitly understood definitions of *queer* with the goal of laying a base-level framework from which the tensions I describe in the following chapters arise. This section also acknowledges the ways in which *queer's* broadness and ambiguity makes it a difficult word to define explicitly, a factor which further contributes to debates and varied conclusions about how the word should be used.

2) QUEER POLITICS: As non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people become increasingly accepted within many places across the U.S., *queer* is being pulled in two opposing directions. Its history as an anti-normative activist term allows *queer* to serve as a stance against gay assimilation and the center-right gay movement, but its use as a catchall umbrella identity pulls it towards political "neutrality" and "assimilationism."

3) QUEER COMMUNITY: Uses of *queer* at Oberlin both stabilize and destabilize categories of gender and sexuality as a result of *queer's* dual meanings of non-normative and non-heterosexual

and/or non-cisgender, creating conflicting dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and hierarchy beneath the queer umbrella.

4) CONTEXTUALIZING QUEER: The academic and political context of Oberlin College makes *queer* a catchall for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities within this location, but the information conveyed through *queer* may be translated differently in other physical, cultural, and temporal contexts; *queer* doesn't universally embody or translate any of the connotations about gender presentation, sexuality, normativity, and political views that it does at Oberlin.

The first three findings are linked through the reappearing theme of tension between notions of *queer* as fixed and stable (referring to a specific range of identities) and *queer* as relational and expansive (referring to a relationship of opposition between queerness and normativity, and the ways in which *queer* allows for the exploration of fluid, changing identities and experiences). This tension is made possible through *queer*'s broadness as an umbrella term; because *queer* encompasses so many people with so many different experiences, individuals' desires to use *queer* are rooted in different, sometimes incompatible goals.

The fourth finding locates *queer* within a particular academic and left political context that allows for *queer* to occupy this place of tension between essential and relational identity. *Queer*'s position as a catchall within Oberlin's context makes it impossible to avoid in describing people who fall within the umbrella category of non-straight and/or non-cisgender.

Most Oberlin participants expressed some level of positive affect towards *queer* as a term despite criticisms of its uses, and all Oberlin participants identified with it. Oberlin participants also shared a roughly common understanding of what *queer* means and the various reasons why

one may or may not want to use it to label their gender identity sexual orientation. Although this paper seeks to explore the tensions and contradictions present in Oberlin students' understandings of *queer* and the boundaries of its meanings, it also strives to understand why this term is still so important to many people today. I conclude that the ambiguity that inevitably arises from the dual definitions of *queer* allows people to define the label in ways that fit their individual needs, but this same ambiguity causes confusion and conflict as people use the same word towards opposing ends. Both the possibilities and disagreements that stem from *queer* are rooted in its ambiguity, and this optimism and dissonance serve as a constant reminder of the tribulations inherent to the authentic experience of community.

ROADMAP

In this paper, I will first contextualize this project by providing background information that details a brief history of *queer*. Next, I will describe my methods and methodological choices. Then, I will discuss my findings within four chapters: Defining Queer, Queer Politics, Queer Community, and Contextualizing Queer. I will finish with conclusions and recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review analyzes sources that describe the uptake and critique of the word *queer* between the early 1990s and the year 2015. I will chart the multifaceted usage, celebration, and criticism of *queer* in activist, academic, and community settings. Because the in-depth interviews I conducted serve as my primary sources, the literature I've gathered here will provide historical context and support for analyses of my interviews.

Before the late 1980s and early 1990s, *queer* has served many different purposes. Originally, *queer* simply meant “strange” or “odd” and was not affiliated with homosexuality or gender nonconformity (Sayers 2005). In the early 1910s-1920s, many men in English-speaking nations who were sexually interested in other men used *queer* to clandestinely refer to themselves and each other (Chauncey 1994, Sayers 2005). As this use of *queer* caught on among mainstream culture, it was commonly used as a slur against homosexual or gender nonconforming men (Dynes 1990, Jagose 1996, Sayers 2005). By the late 1980s, *queer* was considered archaic by some and pejorative by most (Dynes 1990).

When *queer* resurfaced in the 1990s, it was reappropriated by activists, scholars, individuals, and communities. Scholar Annamarie Jagose referred to this new *queer* as “a term that indexes precisely and specifically cultural formations of the late 1980s and 1990s” (Jagose 1996:75). Although as *queer* has moved through the 1990s and into the early 21st century these “cultural formations” have shifted, *queer* exists still, perhaps more prominently than ever, in the interconnected areas of activism, academia, and daily life. Here, I explore more thoroughly the use of *queer* within these areas, as well as the dissenting opinions among scholars and among activist groups concerning the ways in which *queer* is and “should” be used, if at all.

In 1990, the activist group Queer Nation made visible a new understanding of *queer* as an intentionally reclaimed word signifying homosexual orientation and radical anti-assimilationist politics that sought to uproot heteronormativity (Butler 1993, Jagose 1996, Queer Nation 1990, Warner 1991). In Queer Nation’s 1990 manifesto, several members of Queer Nation describe what being queer means to them. A section of the manifesto entitled “Why Queer?” highlights *queer* as a term that brings together gay men and lesbians, stating that “[*queer* is] a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a

more insidious common enemy” (Queer Nation 1990). This quote highlights Queer Nation’s understanding that if someone calls themselves *queer*, they are gay or lesbian, and are probably also interested in action against homophobia and heteronormativity. “Why Queer?” also explains that “[u]sing “queer” is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world” (Queer Nation 1990). In this statement, Queer Nation focuses on *queer*’s pejorative history. “Why Queer?” goes on to say that using *queer* in a reclaimed sense—a sense that embodies both a history of shame and a proud refusal to assimilate because of this shame—gives the word an ability to be a catalyst for radical questioning and disruption of norms that marginalize sexual minorities (Queer Nation 1990).

Other activist groups throughout the 1990s, such as Fed Up Queers (or FUQ)—active between 1998 and 1999—also adopted an understanding of *queer* as sexually non-normative and politically radical (Flynn and Smith 2004). Some activist groups have used *queer* as either primarily political or as primarily indicative of sexual identity, and group members have not always come to a consensus about how they want to frame their use of the word (Flynn and Smith 2004). Eustacia Smith, a former member of FUQ, explained that tension arose within the group based on concerns over whether some group members were sexually “queer” or just interested in activism and FUQ’s community (Flynn and Smith 2004). Additionally, not all of FUQ’s causes were related to sexual orientation—their actions ranged from criticisms of gay assimilation to protests of the shooting of an unarmed West African immigrant by the NYPD (Flynn and Smith 2004). The contradiction and confusion within FUQ about how group members wanted to use *queer* is representative of how the word’s ambiguity blurs distinctions between political views and sexuality.

Scholars and activist groups stress the influence that HIV/AIDS had in stimulating the surge of radical activism surrounding sexuality in the 1990s (Butler 1993, Jagose 1996, Halperin 1995). In HIV/AIDS activist groups such as ACT UP, a framework built around the common goal of combatting AIDS itself, as well as stigma and misinformation, created a coalitional politics that accounted for anyone with AIDS (regardless of how they contracted it,) sexual minority groups, and family and friends (Jagose 1996, Saalfeld and Navarro 1991, Seidman 1994). David Halperin describes ACT UP as “genuinely *queer* insofar as it is broadly oppositional (Halperin 1995:63),” as opposed to Queer Nation, which solely used *queer* to refer to gays and lesbians with radical politics. The emphasis on community and safer sexual practices over sexual identity in AIDS discourse made room for *queer* as a critique of normative constructions of identity and of, more specifically, the coalitional limits of gay identity (Bartos et al. 1993, Dowsett 1991, Edelman 1994, Jagose 1996).

The political complexity surrounding the word *queer* may not be as radical among activist groups in the early 2010s as it was in the 1990s. This can be seen in statements on websites for organizations such as Outright Vermont, which defines *queer* as a “general term for gender and sexual minorities who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual” (Outright Vermont retrieved 2015). This definition doesn’t necessarily question constructions of identity or include anti-assimilationist sentiments, which could indicate that *queer* is not as politically radical in activist worlds today, or, alternatively, that its political connotations are simply implied. Unlike many activist groups in the 1990s, Outright Vermont, as well as other groups active today, explicitly incorporates non-normative gender identity into its definition of *queer*, expanding the term beyond sexual orientation (Outright Vermont retrieved 2015, PFLAG 2015).

In academia, *queer* emerged in the early 1990s as a poststructuralist critique of gay and lesbian studies and was used to destabilize constructions of identity and normativity. Teresa de Lauretis made one of the first academic uses of *queer* in a presentation at a conference in 1990, where she coined queer theory (Jagose 1996, Zielinski 2007). In response to this conference and to cultural shifts within activist communities, many scholars published works using *queer* to critique the naturalization of socially constructed categories of gender and sexuality within gay and lesbian studies, and to connect studies of sexuality to studies of non-normativity in other academic areas (Bersani 1995, Green 2002, Jagose 1996, Zielinski 2007). This body of theoretical work became known as “queer theory,” and ended up situating many academic works on sexuality within the broader area of “queer studies” (Green 2002).

Many academics hoped that *queer* would differ from other terms, like *gay* and *lesbian*, that have specific, essential definitions. Some academics who favor *queer* feel that *lesbian* and *gay* are limited in their potential to critique gender- and sexuality-based oppression because these terms are rooted in the very systems that maintain the binaries of heterosexual/homosexual and man/woman, which must be broken down in order to truly entertain the notion of an end to gender- and sexuality-based oppression (Sedgwick 1990). Central tenets of queer theory, which critique the naturalization of categories of sexuality and gender through social constructionist perspectives, draw upon feminist scholars, such as Simone de Beauvoir, who argued that gender is socially constructed (De Beauvoir 2010), and poststructuralist scholars, including Michel Foucault, who argued that sexuality has been socially constructed as a central aspect of identity in the West within the 20th century (Foucault 1978). One of the founders of queer studies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick drew upon social constructionist arguments to explain the emergence of the homosexual/heterosexual binary and its limitations (Sedgwick 1990).

Although queer studies worked to critique notions of fixed identity, it still centered around the category of homosexuality in the early 1990s. In “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” Cathy Cohen brought recommendations for the improvement of queer studies, expressing the need for a more intersectional understanding of deviant, non-normative sexuality in terms of race, class, and other axes of marginalization (Cohen 1997). Cohen’s work also pushed queer studies to be centered around non-normative sexuality in general instead of homosexuality specifically, advocating an issue-based model of political activism to overtake identity-based models. By the time the Fall/Winter 2005 issue of *Social Text* entitled “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” was published, queer studies had heavily shifted (and continues to shift) to broadly examine non-normativity, often involving race and transnationalism, so that sexuality is no longer at its core (Eng et al. 2005).

Several scholars and activists critique the reclaimed uses of *queer*. Leo Bersani, Adam Green, Susan Wolfe, and Julia Penelope raised concerns that deconstructing identity categories unintentionally results in the erasure of the lived experiences of lesbian and gay people (Bersani 1995, Green 2002, Wolfe and Penelope 1993). Bersani questions the political utility of *queer* on this basis, noting that an acknowledgement of the very real impact of marginalization on the basis of sexual identity can get lost efforts to critique the social construction of heterosexual and homosexual as identity categories (Bersani 1995). In analyzing academic discourses, Bersani also criticizes queer studies for focusing heavily on non-normativity in lieu of sex, which he finds problematic because it de-eroticizes the study of sexuality and erotic practices (Bersani 1995). Green argues that the introduction of queer theory into academia shifted studies of sexuality out of the social sciences and into the humanities, and that the re-insertion of the social sciences would create a more well-rounded approach to studying sexuality (Green 2002).

As academic and activist circles began to embrace *queer*, the term also made its way into gay and lesbian communities as a descriptor of identity, community, and political views. *Queer* has been described as “a term that can direct attention to identity without solidifying it” (Jagose 1996:96), “an identity without an essence” (Halperin 1995:62), a label which “mark[s] a flexible space for the cultural expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception” (Doty 1993:3). Those who take up *queer* as a descriptor of their experiences, though, have varying understandings of *queer*’s political and social connotations. For reasons similar to those of Queer Nation, some communities take up *queer* in order to gather people together based on their shared differences from sexual and gender norms, and to reduce exclusionary dynamics that disparate identity labels can foster (Jagose 1996, Queer Nation 1990). Some individuals simply want an identity label that could go beyond the limited categories of lesbian and gay (Jagose 1996, Outright Vermont retrieved 2015, Queer Nation 1990, PFLAG 2015). Others identify with the word more specifically because certain communities and activist groups had mobilized *queer* as a sexuality descriptor inseparable from radical politics (Queer Nation 1990). Bersani problematized the potential for “queer” to replace “gay” and “lesbian” as a general descriptor for same-sex desire because not all gay people are against normativity in their personal beliefs (Bersani 1995). A cultural shift towards *queer*, Bersani suggests, implies a cultural shift towards a confused, presumptuous, non-specificity about “what it means” to experience same sex attraction beyond physical attraction itself (Bersani 1995).

As an identity term, some people have taken up *queer* for similar reasons as those of activists—its reappropriation prevents those who used *queer* as a slur from having power over victims of the slur if they turn to identify with it, and may result in feelings of empowerment in

queer-identified people (Jagose 1996, Zielinski 2007). Some, especially older gay men, reject *queer* as a “reclaimable” word because they don’t believe that the word can (or should, even,) be separated from its derogatory meanings (James 2013). Outright Vermont mentions in its definition of *queer* that the word still holds harmful meanings for many people (Outright Vermont, retrieved 2015). However, Outright Vermont chooses to use the word on its website because the organization works with many young people who identify with the word (Outright Vermont, retrieved 2015). Many people in younger generations may feel distanced enough from *queer* as a slur that, by the mid 2010s, the pejorative history of the word may play little to no part in the reasons why Millennials find it to be powerful, useful, or meaningful.

Jagose wonders how radical and transformatory *queer* really is as an identity term for individuals and communities. It may be a way for some to indicate that they are not lesbian or gay, but not straight. Further, it can be a way for an individual to reference a complex sexual or gender identity that cannot be concisely described through any other available words (PFLAG 2015). For some, it may simply be the newest, most popular shorthand to describe same-sex attraction, with the potential to overtake gay and lesbian; it may even be primarily indicative of a certain lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etcetera cultural aesthetic (Jagose 1996). If it is about critiquing normativity at all, perhaps this critique is more implicit, and maybe just voiced in the same way that younger generations tend to critique norms of older generations (Jagose 1996). Overall, it is clear that *queer*’s meaning has changed over the past 25 years, and will continue to shift over time, as it was never stabilized in the first place.

In her work *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler takes a stance of ambivalence and curiosity toward *queer*, generating more questions than answers. Of *queer*’s reclamation, she asks, “Is this a simple reversal of valuations such that ‘queer’ means either a past degradation or a present

or future affirmation? Is this a reversal that retains and reiterates the abjected history of the term? ... If the term is now subject to a reappropriation, what are the conditions and the limits of that significant reversal?" (Butler 1993:223). In this last question, Butler scrutinizes trends in the uptake of *queer*, wondering about how its history as a slur will influence the meanings it develops and the populations that it includes and excludes (Butler 1993). Ultimately, she explains that there is a risk in using any identity category, as it will change over time; *queer* is particularly difficult to chart and control because of the ways in which activists and academics have reclaimed it—its only essence being its lack of essence (Butler 1993).

Queer reemerged in the 1990s as a reclaimed slur, a poststructuralist critique of identity, a political challenge to normativity, and a way to unite divisive groups in the name of a greater shared struggle. Over time, it has arguably given a name to some people's previously unnamable feelings, become an overused buzzword, symbolized a rejection of assimilationist gay politics, and, ultimately, marked a culturally specific shifting and grating of values surrounding sexuality, normativity, and identity. These sources will ground *queer* in the historical context that has led to how the word is used today. *Queer's* dual definitions of "non-normative" and "non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender" are rooted in its history in activism, academia, its use as a slur, and its history as a word that meaning "strange."

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Approach and influences

Because my goal was to understand the usage rules of *queer* among Oberlin College students, I took an inductive approach to this project. I draw upon feminist and queer studies

scholarship throughout the paper, but do not approach colloquial uses of *queer* through a feminist or poststructuralist lens.

I was influenced by C. J. 's *Dude, You're a Fag*, an ethnographic study in which Pascoe seeks to understand the usage rules for the word *fag* within the setting of a high school. Pascoe used in-depth interviews and participant observation to complete her study. Pascoe meticulously teased out all of the facets of the use of the word, exposing both the obvious and surprising aspects of the word's use (2007). I sought to do the same with *queer*, looking for both the explicit and implicit definitions and connotations of *queer* within participants' responses.

How I Structured My Fieldwork and Why

Choosing in-depth interviewing.

I developed the concept for this project from a desire to understand the trends of how people use and interpret the word *queer* in their daily lives. Therefore, I felt that hearing people's spoken words was important to fulfilling the goals of this project. I decided that in-depth interviewing would be best suited to this project because it would allow people to fully explain themselves. I felt that survey methods or shorter interviews would simplify this complex topic, not allowing interviewees to explore the many different uses of this word and not allowing interviewees to steer the conversation or ask me clarifying questions. Additionally, in-person interviews, as opposed to online surveys, allowed me to hear participants' immediate, instinctual responses to questions.

I consulted Katheryn Anderson and Dana Jack's feminist interviewing techniques to develop a conversational interviewing style and to create my interview questions. I attempted to maintain awareness about how my own agenda as a researcher might reduce my ability to stay

present and focused on learning from each participant, working to let the conversations flow naturally into a new topics instead of rushing to ask an unrelated question (Anderson and Jack 1991). I also tried to keep interview questions broad as a further attempt to reduce my own agendas.

I decided to use relatively broad prompts for the most part, starting with questions like “do you use the word queer to describe yourself? Why or why not?”, “have you heard queer used in academic contexts? If so, how was it used? What do you think about that usage?” and “have you heard the words queer community used, ever? If so, what did that mean in that context, or what does it mean to you?” I asked more specific follow-up questions, such as “do you think there is a queer community (or communities) where you live currently?” and “who is not allowed to participate in those communities? Or, who might feel uncomfortable participating in queer community-centered events?” I aimed to keep interview questions broad to avoid steering participants too far in any direction.

Choosing populations to interview.

I chose to interview college students because I wanted to learn about the potential influence of academic uses of *queer* on colloquial uses, the intermingling of these definitions, and the ways in which people grapple with differences in these definitions. Additionally, I wanted to understand the ways in which 18-24 year olds related to *queer*. Background research I did involving observing the language use of online communities and opinion articles about gender- and sexuality-related terminology indicated that people in this age group may be using *queer* much more as an identity term and much less as a slur in comparison to other age groups.

My interest in the tensions between academic and colloquial uses of *queer* emerged from my experiences at Oberlin, so I was interested in learning through a more systematic approach about how people are currently using *queer* at Oberlin. Additionally, using Oberlin as a research setting is convenient, in that I currently live in Oberlin and had 3 years of experience participating in and observing the community.

I also wanted to learn about how people in other places are using *queer* because Oberlin is a self-selecting, relatively isolated environment with a culture that is not necessarily representative of many, if any, other places in the U.S. I wanted to ground Oberlin's cultural specificity through using another college or university as a comparison while ultimately focusing on Oberlin as a case study.

I learned through preliminary research that Case Western Reserve University is somewhat politically left but more politically moderate and mixed than Oberlin. I am curious about how far left political views have been linked with the word *queer* over time, which influenced my choice to use a college that is close to Oberlin (in northeast Ohio) but more politically moderate to use as a comparison.

Data Collection

Process of recruiting interviewees.

I began by interviewing people who I already knew so I could get used to the interviewing process in a situation where both myself and the participants felt comfortable. I then emailed a list that included members of my dining cooperative, which has 80 members. Several people replied, saying that they wanted to be interviewed. Through this method, I interviewed several people who I had never spoken to before but had seen around the co-op. I used snowball

sampling to recruit even more interviewees, by asking everyone I interviewed if they had any friends or acquaintances they would recommend as participants. Through snowball sampling, I was able to interview people I had never seen or interacted with, broadening the scope of my reach into Oberlin communities I am not a part of, and encompassing more perspectives. However, my choice to email my co-op to find interviewees may have limited the sections of Oberlin's student body from which I recruited participants, even though it was a convenient and easy way to find more participants.

Interviewing.

Although I can't know whether or not the interviewees thought that I wanted them to answer the questions in specific ways, I tried to start each interview by telling them that there are no wrong answers to these questions, and to keep a consistent interview style to avoid influencing their answers. I tried to enter each interview with an open mind and a lack of expectation for what the interviewees might say, striking a balance between asking follow-up questions that continued in the direction of their thought patterns and making sure that I asked all of the questions that I needed to ask (Anderson and Jack 1991). Throughout the interviewing process, I tried to remain reflexive by adding and subtracting interview questions as I deemed necessary to that particular interview based on the comfort or lack of comfort of the interviewee with certain topics.

My positionality.

My interpretations of participants' perspectives, the patterns between interviews that I felt were most salient, and the ways in which I conceptualize Oberlin were inextricably influenced

by my own observations of *queer's* use as a product of my 3.5 years of experience as an Oberlin student. I worked to distance myself from the context in an effort to acknowledge participants' perspectives without immediately coating my analysis with layers of my own opinions on *queer's* function at Oberlin.

Sometimes a participant would avoid defining a term or explaining a concept because of the assumption that we shared a mutual understanding of a term because it circulates commonly at Oberlin (such as: "social capital" or "homonormativity.") One distancing mechanism I used involved asking clarifying questions about terms that participants used, to be sure that I really understood what they were saying and wasn't making an assumption based on my perceptions of Oberlin's culture (Anderson and Jack 1991).

Methodological Caveats from the Data Collection Process

Difficulty recruiting participants.

I also had trouble meeting demographic goals at both Oberlin and Case, which may have limited the variety of participant perspectives I was able to gather in both places. I defined my demographic goals as: relatively matching the percentage of interviewees of particular demographic groups with the percentage of people within my population (Oberlin students) who fall into those same demographic groups. While I was able to meet most of my demographic goals concerning gender identity, sexual orientation, cis/trans/non-binary status, location and political climate in hometown, and other important areas that influence identity and experience, I had trouble recruiting first years, people of color, and people with disabilities. Although I reached out to people who fell within these demographic categories, I was not able to interview

any first years, and I was only able to interview several people of color and people with disabilities.

Speaking for others.

In my interviews, participants spoke from their own experiences, but I also asked them about their perceptions about how others use the word, and how inclusion and exclusion function in terms of the word *queer* and “queer communities,” so people sometimes ended up speaking for the experiences of others. I put interviewees in this situation with the intention of getting a well-rounded grasp on how queer is used and how people feel about that, since I can’t interview as many people as I would like. However, speaking for other people can be problematic, both emotionally and intellectually. Speaking for other people can cause harm, particularly when people don’t necessarily believe what you think they do, and their actions or intentions were interpreted in a way that does not align with their own perceptions. This can additionally be bound up in layers of oppression, as privileged people speaking for marginalized others has served as a silencing tactic (Alcoff 1991). Speaking for others can also be intellectually problematic because of the inaccuracies it creates. Several interviewees acknowledged the problems with this. However, I still believe that asking people about their perceptions of the term queer and queer communities was important to shaping my understanding of general uses of *queer* at Oberlin.

Choosing Which Words to Use

Terms.

In my work on this project, I ascribe to the philosophy that we can take no identity terms for granted. Although no words are “neutral,” I had to make choices about which words to use in which contexts in order to describe the populations that I’m writing about.

I will use the words *non-heterosexual* and *non-cisgender* to refer to groups of people who might also be referred to with words such as *LGBT*, *LGBTQ*, or *queer*, in varying contexts. I chose the words *non-heterosexual* and *non-cisgender* because participants often used these words to describe the identities that are included within the umbrella terms *LGBT*, *LGBTQ*, and *queer*. Because these three umbrella terms are the subject of this paper’s analysis, I did not want to use them to “neutrally” describe any group(s) of people, because this would be confusing and antithetical to the goal of this paper, in which the meanings of these terms are not taken for granted. I recognize potential issues of invalidation and othering that arise from describing a marginalized group of people by defining them by what they are not (the dominant group), and of course no terms could possibly be “neutral,” but I need to describe relevant groups of people in some way, and *non-heterosexual* and/or *non-cisgender* were the terms with the most clear, least debated meanings that I could find.

When I write about a term as a direct object, I put it in italics. When I am using a term to signify meaning, I keep the term in non-italic script. Because I spend most of this paper talking about *queer* instead of using it to describe or refer to something, *queer* usually appears in italics.

Aliases.

Because of the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the topics of gender and sexual identity, I gave all participants the option to use an alias. The majority of participants chose to be referred to with aliases. Additionally, I have attempted to anonymize participants’ quotes so that

their identities and the identities of others are not implicitly revealed in this paper. Because Oberlin College is a relatively small community, it is possible that readers may guess a participant's identity despite my attempts to anonymize quotes; it may not be feasible for me to protect interviewees' identities completely.

Several participants stated that they would like the name they go by at Oberlin to be used instead of an alias. After I completed this project, these participants confirmed that they would still prefer their names to be used in the paper instead of aliases. I honored these requests.

FINDINGS

Defining Queer

Many academics have described the ambiguity of *queer*, touting it as a word with the potential to break down socially constructed identity categories and build coalitional activism (Halperin 1995; Jagose 1996; Warner 1991). Academics also fear *queer's* ambiguity, wondering if its broadness might lead to implicit exclusion (Halperin 1995; Jagose 1996; Walters 1996). In *Saint Foucault*, David Halperin named *queer* as "an identity without an essence," acknowledging *queer* as a relational term signaling anti-normativity that fluctuates based on context (Halperin 1996:62). Comments from participants in this study both challenge and align with Halperin's hope for *queer*, indicating that uses of *queer* at Oberlin simultaneously solidify the term an essential, fixed identity category while maintaining it as a relational term meaning non-normative.

Participants indicate that reclaimed *queer* is rooted in two definitions, one fixed (non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender) and one relational (non-normative). In describing “non-normative” as the relational definition of *queer*, I mean that *queer*’s use as non-normative is based upon an opposition to social norms. Therefore, this definition is not static, in that social norms shift and change based on space, time, and other contextual factors. Although non-heterosexuality and non-cisgenderness are also relational, in that their existence is contingent on the existence of the categories heterosexual and cisgender, I consider these categories to be relatively fixed and stable because they can be explicitly defined. Both categories are now established within Western society—particularly non-heterosexuality—so much so that they are largely considered to be inherent, biological phenomena (despite scholars’ arguments that these categories are socially constructed) (Bennett 2014). Non-normativity, as a concept, is completely dependent on context and application to specific circumstances.

When *queer* is used to mean non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender, it is sometimes used as an “umbrella” term that refers to anyone who has an identity within the scope of non-heterosexuality or non-cisgenderness, and it is sometimes used to describe an individual’s specific, personal experience with gender identity or sexual orientation. Based on comments from the vast majority of participants, when Oberlin students use *queer* colloquially to mean non-normative, they are usually referring specifically to non-normative sexuality, gender identity, or gender presentation. Participants have never heard *queer* used as a slur at Oberlin College, but acknowledge its use as a slur against LGBT people in other areas of the United States and its widespread use as a slur in the 20th century.

Queer’s meanings of non-normative and non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender circumstantially compliment and clash with one another. The dissonance between these

definitions arises because of the relatively fixed, stable nature of “non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual” as an identity category and the looser, relationally-defined “non-normative.” Together, these definitions create much more expansive possibilities for gender and sexual identities, but leave the boundaries of queer identity vague and debatable, allowing for in-group cultural confusion and dissent about *queer*’s political implications. The broadness of “non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender,” as a relatively stable, fixed category facilitates these possibilities and debates in ways that other similar identity categories may not. The opportunities and tensions that arise from these two core definitions of *queer* drive my analysis of its uses.

Definition 1: Non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender.

Perhaps to the chagrin of many queer theory scholars, *queer* has not escaped—at least in its colloquial uses at Oberlin College—the realm of sexual orientation from which it was born. When I asked Oberlin participants what *queer* means on campus, all participants said that *queer* refers to non-heterosexual sexual orientation, and most participants said that *queer* also refers to non-cisgender gender identity. A quote from B, a cisgender woman who identifies as *queer*, characterizes the most common way that participants described *queer*:

B: How is it being defined? I think it is being used in the way of, the identity of any person who doesn't have the privilege of being like, both straight and cis. I feel like the definition of queer is more contextualized by what it's not than what it is.

B's quote explains the broadness of *queer* as a category; because *queer* is defined by what it's not—cisgender and heterosexual—there are countless gender identities and sexual orientations encompassed by *queer*.

Some participants felt that *queer* tends to refer to sexual orientation more than gender identity, and other participants observed the opposite. Katherine, a cisgender woman who identifies as queer, recalls sometimes hearing *queer* used in reference to only sexual orientation, as well as in reference to both sexual orientation and gender identity:

Katherine: It's really nebulous. Sometimes, people say, "Queer folks and trans folks." Sometimes, also, people encompass trans folks in queerness. People can say, "I'm genderqueer," or people say queer, but they really just mean that they're gay or...it's so different for so many different people.

Katherine's response highlights the fluidity and variability of *queer*'s meaning in reference to gender versus sexuality based on different speakers and different contexts.

Others noted the ways in which sexual orientation and gender identity and presentation interconnect. These imbrications complicate one's ability to determine whether *queer* more frequently or consistently references gender or sexuality. In their interview, Alton, who is transmasculine and bisexual, first discussed *queer* as referring to sexual orientation and later noted that *queer* can be used to describe gender presentation. Alton first describes *queer* as a descriptor of non-straight sexual orientation:

Alton: It could be same sex relations...it could be same gender, across gender, of two non-normative genders...it could really mean anything that someone tries to use...but I would say, a lot of people will be like, “oh, I didn’t know that person was queer.” And will use it in that way, to denote, “I didn’t know they would be down to hook up with people of their same sex slash gender.”

Later in their interview, though, Alton describes *queer* as directly related to their non-binary, transmasculine gender presentation:

Alton: I am really queer-presenting in terms of not really looking like what someone who was born in my body should look like.

Alton uses *queer* to describe both sexual orientation and gender presentation, Alton’s comments indicate the ways in which colloquial uses of *queer* vary based on context, in that their first quote uses *queer* to indicate same-gender attraction, while their second quote implied a use of *queer* that connotes gender identity. The majority of Oberlin interviewees used *queer* in similarly fluid, context-driven ways. Throughout the course of the interviews, participants’ uses of *queer* fluctuated in meaning based on changing topics of discussion.

Definition 2: Non-normative.

As a word that originally meant “weird,” “odd,” or “strange,” *queer* has always been understood as a word that opposes social norms. I speculate that this original definition of *queer* made it a good candidate, in the eyes of activists and academics who began and continued its

reclamation. Activists in the 1980s and '90s and the academics who borrowed from and extrapolated on their re-defining of *queer* used the word to signal an opposition to societal norms and normative notions of identity hoped to use *queer* to build coalitional politics through uniting many different groups on the basis of their deviation from social norms (Halperin 1996). *Queer* not only referred to non-straight and non-cis people, but served as a constant reminder of the position of non-normativity these groups of people occupied in society. Over twenty-five years after that surge in *queer*'s reclamation, many participants still think that non-normativity, or opposition to mainstream cultural norms constitutes an important part of *queer* identity.

For many participants, implicit in the definition of *queer* as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender is the acknowledgement of the non-normative position of these identity categories within society. In this way, the definitions of *queer* as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender and *queer* as non-normative are deeply intertwined. A comment from B in which she defines *queer* sexuality highlights the notion that *queer* is not always about a particular range of sexual orientations or gender identities but can be much more about an oppositional relationship to normativity:

B: I think the idea is less of a particular identity and it's more, you're not—I'm doing air quotes right now—"normal." [You're queer] if you fall into literally any category that is not, like, monogamous, cis, straight partnerships, or lack thereof...and lack thereof counts as not the normative, so you're queer, by definition of like, not being the normative thing.

In noting that *queer* doesn't describe a particular identity but instead an oppositional relationship to norms of gender and sexuality, B describes the ways in which *queer* is not simply have a

specific, fixed definition (non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender); it also highlights the non-normativity of certain orientations and types of relationships.

Simone, who identifies as queer, takes B's point further in saying that queerness does not simply encompass non-normativity in general, but refers to non-normative sexual desires and identity in particular. From Simone's perspective, someone should only be able to identify as queer if they experience non-normative sexual desires:

Simone: A really important part of it is having non-normative sexual desires. If you extend queerness beyond that, to the point where someone can be queer without having a non-normative sexual identity, that's when I think there's something wrong.

Interviewer: What do you mean by non-normative sexual desires?

Simone: ...Sexual and romantic desires that are outside of dominant structures and intentionally seek to disrupt what is normative sexual practices and culture around relationships. I guess that's what I mean. Just having your desires be rooted in something that is on the other side of that.

B's observation about *queer's* use on campus and Simone's opinion about how the word should be used expand the definition of *queer* beyond sexual orientation in particular, accounting for non-normative sexual practices, such as non-monogamy. Based on B and Simone's definitions of *queer* as non-normative, polyamorous people who are cisgender and heterosexual should be able to identify as queer or be referred to as queer, because their sexual desires and practices are non-normative. However, both B and Simone, as well as many other participants, struggle to determine whether cisgender, heterosexual people who practice polyamory should be

considered queer because of their non-normative sexual practices, even if they are heterosexual and cisgender.

Wolf, a gay trans man who identifies with the word *queer*, struggles to find a resolution to his opinions about whether cisgender and heterosexual people who are polyamorous should be able to identify as *queer*.

Wolf: I don't know how to wrap my head around it, because I don't want to tell someone, "you are not queer because you identify as straight." But on the other hand, I don't think that someone who hasn't personally been hurt by the term should be able to reclaim it. So I feel like people who may be straight, cis, or who pass consistently as straight and cis and have not been harmed by the word should not necessarily identify with it. But again, it's difficult.... I don't want to shame someone else's identity and tell them you can't identify as this. But also, as someone who has faced oppression because of this identity... You aren't facing the same oppression so why should you get to use this term?

Wolf expresses concern at the notion of someone identifying as *queer* if they are heterosexual and cisgender, because they haven't experienced the same marginalization on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation as non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people have. However, he hesitates to tell someone how they should or shouldn't be able to identify. Wolf's explanation implies that although "non-normative" is one definition of *queer*, this definition is contingent on the first, fixed definition of *queer* as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender.

When I asked Keenen if straight, cisgender people who are polyamorous or practice BDSM would be allowed to identify as *queer*, he mulled over the answer, ultimately deciding that he would accept a polyamorous person's identification with *queer*.

Keenen: That's really interesting. I've never really thought to include those under the term.

Yeah, I definitely...I see being poly definitely more in that than BDSM. I don't know, 'cuz it's like, polyamory has a lot of stigma, and is really looked down upon in society. Yeah, I would accept that...Yeah. I don't know. Also like, you know it's like, if you're rejecting people, you're just kind of perpetuating what you've been...you're just perpetuating the system... I don't know, I feel like people who face oppression or marginalization, whatever that is, should be able to be in a group, and they can acknowledge their privilege within that group, obviously. 'Cuz yeah, if you're straight and cis, and poly, you don't face the same oppression and discrimination as if you were trans. Um, but they can still use the term, but acknowledge where they stand.

Keenen feels that he would accept polyamorous people as queer, because he is hesitant to reject anyone, feeling a degree of hypocrisy were he to reject someone with non-normative sexual practices from *queer*, because then he would continue to perpetuate the stigmatization and exclusion that non-heterosexual people already experience from living in a heteronormative culture. His perspective indicates a certain conception of unity between people marginalized on the basis of sexuality, whether or not it is sexual orientation.

Both Keenen and Wolf puzzle over this question that challenges the limits of *queer* as “non-normative,” ultimately coming to different conclusions. Cases like this bring up tensions

that emerge between the dual understanding of *queer* as “non-normative” and “non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender.”

Although most participants, like Simone, reserve *queer* to describe non-normative sexualities and gender identities, some participants believe that *queer* can apply to non-normativity more broadly, even beyond kink, polyamory, asexuality, and other identities and practice related to sexuality (even though they are not sexual orientation). Comments from Peyton, who identifies as genderqueer and pansexual, contrast heavily with Simone’s belief that *queer* should only be used to describe non-normative sexuality. Peyton views *queer* differently than most of their peers at Oberlin, applying *queer* to non-normative circumstances, actions, and views that don’t necessarily have to do with sexual orientation or gender identity. Peyton talks about their conception of *queer* and the pushback they’ve received from other Oberlin students who don’t feel that this more “open” understanding of *queer* should be used colloquially.

Peyton: I often think about using queer in the context of doing something that is um, culturally seen as not a normal way of expressing oneself, or like, a very individual way of expressing oneself that doesn’t um, manifest itself in like a predictable way. So, queer politics, I would say, um, I can see that being anything from like, being a right-wing conservative but having many leftist views, but still saying like, ‘no I’m like, kind of a mix of all of these things,’ so kind of queer in the way that it’s um... Like if they were to be, identify themselves as like, ‘I am a right wing conservative,’ and they were to exist in a group of people that were all right wing conservatives, um, and yet they have differing opinions that weren’t the norm of the group, then I see that as being like a queer politics kind of situation... And in queer actions, I can definitely see maybe a very, very masculine cis male being open about feelings, showing a lot of

vulnerability, and showing that he's outside of the norm of masculinity while also identifying as a masculine person.

But I definitely have had pushback where I've had conversations with individuals where, you know, they've strongly felt that queer is a term that should be reserved for individuals who have been oppressed by their identity being very openly queer in terms of gender and sexuality, as opposed to all the other kind of like, queer acts, queer behaviors, queer presentations without identifying as like, anything that's not cis, straight. A lot of people disagree with queer being such an open term.

Peyton's view clashes with that of most other participants, calling *queer's* definition as non-normative into question. The pushback Peyton has received indicates that, for most participants and many people on campus, *queer* cannot be used simply as a substitute for non-normative, without the context of gender and sexuality.

John, a masculine-presenting cisgender gay man, has a different relationship entirely with *queer*. He feels unsure about his relationship with the word *queer*, based on his observations of the use of the word on Oberlin's campus. John identifies with the word *queer* because of his non-normative sexual practices, but as a masculine-presenting cis man, he doesn't feel that his gender identity is particularly queer. He explains:

John: With regards to gender, I think [being queer] is more of just like, subverting traditional gender norms that are seen in like, the wider culture.

John's quote highlights areas of dissonance that arise between the meaning of *queer* as non-normative and the meaning of *queer* as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender because, as John explains, his normative gender presentation makes him feel distant from *queer* as an identifier, but his non-normative sexual practices cause him to feel connected with the word.

B, Simone, Wolf, Keenen, Peyton and John's comments bring up elements of tension between the definition of *queer* as non-normative and as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender. The simultaneously synergistic and dissonant relationship between these two definitions of *queer* will characterize many of the conflicts between participants' perspectives throughout this paper. Chapters 3 and 4, which cover understandings of *queer* as they relate to the political and to notions of community, will further explore the themes of dissonance that arise between Simone and Peyton's understandings of *queer*, as well as John's internal debate about his relationship with the label.

Broadness and ambiguity.

Despite their attempts to pinpoint the definitions of *queer*, many participants noted the ambiguity of these definitions, saying that *queer* is ultimately difficult to define. Riley, T, B, and Katherine, all Oberlin students who identify as queer, mentioned the ambiguity of *queer*'s meanings:

T: What does it mean? That is a good question, but I think generally people are usually using it to mean LGBT, vaguely. LGBT+, I guess.

Riley: It's hard to tell quite what people mean.

B: I guess to different people it means different things. And...ok that's really vague.

Katherine: [Queer] has a lot of erasure, is vague, isn't specific, is used broadly but it's still used to exclude people in some ways.

T acknowledges the broadness of *queer* by comparing it to LGBT, another umbrella term.

Katherine hints at the difficulties of exclusion and erasure that arise from a broad, non-specific term. *Queer's* broadness is a major factor causing its ambiguity. Together, *queer's* broadness and its dual definitions as non-normative and non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender combine to create new possibilities for political stances and identities, as well as tensions and disagreements.

In the next two chapters, participants grapple with and contest these definitions and the fixedness of *queer*, the contradictions between these definitions, and what these definitions imply.

Queer Politics

"As we assimilate, what does queer become?"

When I asked Keenen how he predicts *queer* might be used in the future, he discussed the increased normalization of same gender relationships and somewhat increasing normalization of transgender issues. As a gay man who wants to eventually get married and have kids, Keenen wonders about the best political strategy to address issues of inequality between cis, heterosexual people and non-cisgender, non-heterosexual people: through assimilationist strategies or radical resistance.

Keenen's comment captures the tension tugging queer in multiple directions as non-straight and non-cis identities become more mainstream and normalized, yet a knowledge of queer's history as a term signaling resistance to norms remains:

Keenen: It's like really crazy how normalized same sex relationships are becoming, and how I guess trans issues are becoming more at least part of a dialogue, but that still has a long way to go unfortunately. I don't know, I guess... I still don't want [queer] to be so normalized that it loses the community, or you lose that aspect of your identity. And I don't think it ever will. But I see it being used more, just commonly. I don't know if adults now use it, but maybe adults will use it? Because I think being queer just won't be a big deal, so maybe people will just use it as an identifier, because it's really not a big deal. And also, hopefully moving towards a society where people aren't assumed as straight. But then again, queer kind of is based on the assumption that there is a normative behavior, which is being straight. I don't know, it's kind of one of those weird things, where it's like, it's almost inherently non-normative, but as you assimilate, then what does [queer] become? And as it gains more acceptance as normal, and valid, what does it become?

Keenen feels conflicted that he wants non-straight and non-cis people to become more accepted but doesn't want his identity to be erased or lose its meaning. He wonders what role *queer* will play within this shifting political dynamic. Keenen's comment points to several questions that shaped my interviews and ultimately formed the core of this chapter: what happens when a word meaning non-normative becomes normalized? If *queer* is used more frequently as an identity term, will it serve as a site of resistance against assimilationist rhetoric surrounding LGBT issues

and people, or will it become just another identity term alongside gay, lesbian, bisexual, and others within the acronym? Is there a political difference between LGBT and LGBTQ? And do you have to have a certain brand of left political views to call yourself *queer*?

Oberlin College provides an interesting case study through which we can explore these questions, because, as several participants explain later in this chapter, *queer* is already used commonly as the main catchall, umbrella term for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people in Oberlin. Oberlin provides the opportunity, on a small scale, to see what happens to people's observations and opinions about *queer* when it is used commonly as a reclaimed identity term.

Keenen's question, "as you assimilate, then what does queer become," stems from shifts in LGBT political agendas that began in the 1990s. As the national political climate swung to the right in the 1990s and early 2000s, gay and lesbian civil rights organizations have moved away from community organizing and towards "neoliberal rhetoric and corporate decision-making models" and corporate sponsorship, becoming aligned with "an increasingly narrow gay, moneyed elite" (Duggan 2003:45). These organizations began to center gay marriage and military service inclusion in their goals instead of other issues; this resulted in a new gay alignment with political centrism and the depoliticizing of LGBT issues. These groups with assimilationist views aim to bring gay issues into the mainstream and assimilate gay people into the existing culture instead of questioning the values of mainstream culture itself, as a culture that operates through oppression. The Independent Gay Forum (IGF), a right-wing gay rights group, explicitly linked homosexuality with neoliberal values within their mission statement. Lisa Duggan terms this "new neoliberal sexual politics" as "the new homonormativity," because it "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a

privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (50). Many Oberlin participants, like Keenen, recognize homonormative political agendas, and wonder whether *queer* will and should play a more “neutral” role, as an identity label, or a more “radical” role, as a word meaning non-normativity and signaling anti-assimilationist political strategies.

Based on participants’ comments about the political implications and uses of *queer* at Oberlin and other places in their lives, I observe that a political climate of increased mainstreaming of LGBT rights movements and increased acceptance of many LGBT people across many communities in the U.S. places a particular tension on the word *queer*. Because of the word’s past uses as a term signifying left, anti-assimilationist, anti-establishment political views, some feel that *queer* sits in even greater opposition to LGBT causes that operate through neoliberal, state-sanctioned frameworks; others think that as the state and general public increasingly accepts LGBT people, *queer* is being dragged into political centrism as an identity term and losing its “radical” left political connotations. It is this tension that many participants grappled with. Some argued a third point, that *queer* is not absorbing into mainstream norms, but through the nation-wide proliferation of neoliberal values, *queer* has developed/is developing its own norms as a particular type of hip, artsy “alternative” culture within particular locations and communities (such as Oberlin). I argue that all three of these somewhat contradictory shifts are happening simultaneously, and that these debates are made possible because of the tension created through *queer*’s dual definitions of non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender and non-normative.

The subsections within this chapter address participants’ feelings about whether identifying as queer implies anything about one’s political views; the differences and similarities

between LGBT, gay, and queer as umbrella identity labels; “anti-normative” norms surrounding *queer*’s use in Oberlin and other communities; and *queer*’s ability or inability to serve as a political unifier for the many different identities and related causes that it encompasses.

Does queer identity necessitate queer politics?

When I asked participants if identifying as queer carried any connotations about one’s political views, people gave many different responses. Some participants felt that in identifying with the word they are making a statement about their gender identity and/or sexual orientation and their political views, because they think of their political views and their sexual orientation and gender identity as inextricably linked. However, because of *queer*’s importance to people today as a term that includes those who don’t quite fit into the labels within the LGBT acronym, people have many reasons to use *queer* that don’t involve political affiliation. Many participants grappled with the benefits and drawbacks of perceiving *queer* as inherently connected to political leftness, and the implications of what this means for choosing which identity term to use. I also asked participants if one could identify as queer only because of political views rooted in anti-normativity, to which most participants said “no.” In this way, *queer* as an identity label for non-heterosexuality and non-cisgenderness seems to trump *queer* as politically non-normative among most Oberlin participants. However, whether or not *queer* tends to carry political connotations is still debated. Participants’ responses to this question support my greater finding that *queer*’s use as an fixed identity label and a relational term meaning non-normative allows it to be simultaneously politically radical and politically neutralized.

Before fully exploring participants’ responses, I must state the caveat that framing sexual orientation and gender identities as “inherent” and political views as a “choice” overly simplifies

this debate, and ignores the ways in which the inevitably limited frameworks through which people are socialized influences the development of sexualities, genders, and political leanings. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* developed the notion that sexuality is socially constructed, and therefore the categories of sexuality and norms around sexuality exist within specific social contexts that change over time (Foucault 1978). Therefore, one's identity as gay, for example, is not inherent, because the structures that enforce and allow people to conceive of that category have not always existed, and don't exist in all cultures. Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, among many other feminist scholars, theorize the social construction of gender, explaining the ways in which people develop gender roles and modes of performativity that continuously produce gender (De Beauvoir 2010; Butler 1990). Similarly, the range of possible political opinions we can develop are limited and influenced by our demographic position within particular social contexts and our relationships with institutions and governing bodies. Thus, political views and gender or sexual identity both involve degrees of agentic and involuntary motions based on social influence within our societal context. Despite the problems with the framing of sexual orientation and gender identity as inherent and political views as chosen, this way of understanding of these concepts is currently pervasive across the U.S., and so I will largely consider participants' comments through this framework. Some participants, however, recognize the ways in which individuals' understandings of sexuality and politics are both contextually specific and intertwined with each other.

Two Oberlin participants, Simone and Eliza, have opposing takes on their relationships with *queer*. Simone, a 3rd year Politics major who has taken several Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist studies classes that involve analyzing *queer*, feels that her non-heterosexual sexual orientation explains how she acquired the political beliefs that she has:

Simone: This is an identity I hold that I'm willing to take beyond me, and be like, "Oh, maybe my politics have been queer because of my sexuality." My experiences in a queer community have changed the way I think about a lot of my past, and my family, and where I come from. In that way I have been queered. [laughs] For me it's more of interacting with my sexuality outside of cis/het timelines and cis/het society and lifestyle more generally. On the one hand, being in a queer relationship means you are embracing a sexual relationship that has no procreative part of it, or not a normative procreation. For me, a lot of that comes from there, where I start to think about the way that there are timelines created by cis/het culture, and that my relationships don't fit into those. It felt really good when I was like, okay, I actually have opinions that are way different than my family and friends at home, and it even makes a lot of sense for me to be a queer person with these politics. There is a non-normative part of my lifestyle, but I don't have to compartmentalize it.

Simone explains that her sexual orientation has influenced her political beliefs because her sexual orientation and experience within queer communities has changed the way she conceives of her life and politics. For Simone, identifying as queer because of its meaning as non-normative recognizes her queerness as not just limited to who she is attracted to, but as part of a holistic lifestyle. Jack (formerly Judith) Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* argues that "queer uses of time and space develop...in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (Halberstam 2005:1). Halberstam explains that the lives of queer people are configured outside of heterosexual timelines that include normative lifestyle

moments such as marriage and reproduction, thus shaping the ways queer people move through their lives and the desires and needs queer people acquire (Halberstam 2005).

Margaret comes to conclusions that align with Simone's view of *queer* as tied to certain politics and lifestyles. Margaret thinks that being not cisgender and/or not heterosexual inevitably causes many people to have lifestyles and politics that differ from cisgender and heterosexual lifestyles and politics.

Unlike Simone and Margaret, Eliza doesn't feel that her use of *queer* has political connotations. Eliza, a cisgender woman, identifies as *queer* because her sexual orientation fits within the definition of non-heterosexual, and because that term feels more comfortable than other terms, like bisexual and lesbian, which she has considered using in the past.

Eliza: I don't think that for me, personally, identifying as queer is a political thing. That doesn't necessarily mean that I don't agree some more radical beliefs but for me, it's not a political thing. It's more of a comfort thing. Also, that's in the context of Oberlin where lots of people use the word queer and all of my friends do. I feel like if I was outside of Oberlin, it might feel more making a statement. Here, it doesn't feel like making a statement, a political statement or any kind of statement. As we get older, it might become more commonly used. I feel like the fear or the potential problem with that is if it just crosses over and becomes LGBTQ, becomes usable for everyone and something else wouldn't come up as the more radicalized term. I feel like queer used to be a pretty radicalized term. Some people are still using it like that. I'm definitely not using it like that. Maybe that means I shouldn't be using it but I don't know.

Eliza recognizes the influence that Oberlin's context has on her relationship with *queer*, noting that all of her friends and many other people use *queer* very frequently. Like Keenen's comment

at the beginning of the chapter, this quote from Eliza points to a fear that many other participants share that *queer* will lose its anti-assimilationist connotations if it becomes more frequently used. She questions her own use of the term, wondering if she should be calling herself *queer* at all if she doesn't use it to make a political statement.

Jessica, a 2nd year Comparative American Studies and Sociology double major, observes that *queer* is a catchall term used to describe non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual people at Oberlin. Jessica's comment helps explain the reasons why Eliza and other Oberlin students identify as *queer* without viewing it as politically radical but while still having left, anti-assimilationist political views.

Jessica: I don't really have that much of a background in queer theory, because the way I first understood queer when I first heard the term in high school, was political queerness, which is not an umbrella term. Just saying not lesbian, as in gay, but queer, as in fuck you. Something like that. Queer at that point in time, I think the discourse around it, was that it was a politically charged term. It was a refusal to conform. It's like a leftie-gay thing to say. Because of everyone [at Oberlin] already being pretty leftie, and many people being gay, it kind of became a catchall term here, without people consciously examining the political implications and roots of it.

Jessica argues that Oberlin's politically left environment allows *queer* to carry less radical meaning for many people because the majority of people are assumed to have similar, politically left views regardless of their sexual orientation. *Queer's* affiliation with left politics likely was the initial reason why it became popular in Oberlin, but its popularity was likely the reason that it has lost its political connotations among some Oberlin students.

Wolf, a gay trans man who uses the word *queer* to describe both his gender identity and sexual orientation, agrees with Simone that identifying as queer often implies radical political beliefs, but adds that he has never heard of anyone identifying as *queer* because of political beliefs alone. Margaret agrees with this sentiment.

Wolf: I feel like identifying with the word queer, at least here, gives the sense that you are also politically active. I don't think that you can be like, "politically queer" without identifying as queer. Yeah I've never heard someone who doesn't identify as queer being like, identifying with that sentiment. I feel like in identifying with the word gay, there's not inherently a political statement made about you or your political opinions. Because everyone knows what gay is. We've fought for equality, blah blah blah. But queerness, I feel like it encompasses so many identities, a lot of people who identify as queer still don't have a lot of rights. And so, I feel like being queer creates the sense that you are still fighting for your rights and everyone else in the queer community's rights.

Both Wolf and Margaret imply that gender identity and sexual orientation are more central to *queer* than an oppositional relationship to normativity, but that anti-normative political beliefs are often implied when someone identifies as *queer* because of gender identity or sexual orientation. Wolf also offers an explanation for why *queer* may have retained politically left connotations even as many LGBT people become more accepted into mainstream culture, and terms like *gay* become less politicized. *Queer's* broadness encompasses anyone who is not heterosexual and/or not cisgender, causing it to serve as a reminder that not everyone beneath the queer umbrella experiences the same level of marginalization and the same rights. North

Carolina's trans-exclusionary bathroom law from March 2016, the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act, serves as just one example of the ways in which not everyone who may fall under the queer umbrella experiences the same level of discrimination and systemic violence; transgender and gender non-conforming people experience disproportionate amounts of discrimination compared to than cisgender and gender conforming people who are not heterosexual (GLAAD 2017). Wolf argues that *queer* remains politically charged because the discrepancy in rights between different groups of people represented under the queer umbrella encourages people to work towards the rights of all queer people.

Through the experiences and voices of Simone, Eliza, Jessica, and Wolf, this section explained differing views about whether or not identifying as queer carries political implications. *Queer's* history as a radical, anti-assimilationist term makes this debate about its meaning salient as LGBT political rhetoric and organizations attain assimilationist goals. My findings indicate that *queer's* use as non-normative serves as a reminder that non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people's lives and positions in a political system are inevitably non-normative because of their marginalization; however, *queer's* its colloquial use as an identity term causes it to retain non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual as the necessary core of the term—one cannot identify as politically queer without identifying as queer in terms of gender identity or sexual orientation. Additionally, *queer's* broadness allows people to identify with the term for many different reasons, perpetuating a state of unresolved tension in which Eliza and Simone can both identify as queer for very different reasons. Oberlin's politically left culture also creates a setting in which people are able to identify as queer without implicitly making a political statement. The next section addresses the ways in which other terms, specifically *gay* and *LGBT*, serve

sometimes similar and sometimes different purposes as *queer* in terms of their political implications and purposes.

“I’m not gay, as in happy; I’m queer, as in fuck you”: contrasting the political implications of gay, LGBT, and queer

This section draws upon the previous section in considering the role of *queer* in a cultural context where some LGBT people and issues are increasingly accepted, and examining the benefits and drawbacks of *queer*’s retention or loss of anti-assimilationist connotations. However, this section considers *queer* against *gay* and *LGBT*, two other terms that are used as umbrella identity labels. Comparing *queer* to other umbrella terms for the same group of people reveals further division among participants’ opinions about whether *queer* is becoming normative or not. Many participants observed that *queer* differs from *gay* and *LGBT* in the contexts in which it is used, noting that mainstream media use *gay* and *LGBT* but not *queer*, and left-leaning websites tend to use *queer*. However, other participants feel that *queer*’s definition as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender outweighs its definition as non-normative, and people simply act as if *queer* is being used to mean non-normative, when it is truly behaving as a fixed identity term. These participants fear that assumptions that *queer* is the “non-normative” word and *LGBT* and *gay* are the “assimilationist” words alienate people who don’t use *queer* and limit the recognition that “normative” gay people still face marginalization. *Queer*’s position between these two definitions, non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender and non-normative, allows it to reside at the center of debates about assimilationism, lifestyle, and strategic word choice.

Many participants acknowledge that *gay*, *LGBT*, and *queer* are all used as umbrella terms in varying circumstances and with varying political implications. Margaret explains that there is

not one particular umbrella term that is used universally for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people:

Margaret: I definitely prefer "queer," for its use as an umbrella term. The LGBT acronym is notorious for being really unwieldy and also infinitely varying. It's an interesting period of non-consensus. I'd be interested to see where we're at in five, ten years. But right now, I don't really have any solid ways to work with that.

Margaret wonders about what will happen to *queer* and *LGBT* as umbrella terms over the next several years, noting that there is no consensus among non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people about which one should be used.

S, Keenen, Riley, Katherine, and Eliza all note that they don't hear *queer* used in mainstream politics. These participants mentioned that politicians and mainstream news sources tend to use either *gay* or *LGBT* because these terms are explicitly definable.

S: You're not gonna see it in the New York Times, because they'd have to define it if they were going to use it, and they can't. So nothing with a lot of cultural capital will use it. CNN is gonna be like 'gay people are doing this,' not 'queer activists are doing this.' And people will be like wait a minute, you used that word, what does it mean? And they don't know, and we don't know either! There are a lot of places where it can't be used because of its unintelligibility. Like, it can't be used in official formal ways because that would require definition, and we don't have that.

S's observation indicates that *gay* and *LGBT* are often used as umbrella terms over *queer* in formal contexts, maybe because *queer* cannot be easily defined due to its broadness and dual, ambiguous definitions.

Jessica, who identifies as gay and uses queer as an umbrella term, explains how she draws a distinction between *LGBT* and *queer*. Although she feels that *queer* is much less radical at Oberlin because people use it as a catchall, she recognizes differences in political implications between *LGBT* and *queer* outside of Oberlin:

Jessica: I would say the Human Rights Campaign is LGBT politics and DarkMatter is queer politics. I think there's mainstream gaytriarchy, which is like marriage equality and legal rights and this and that. It's more reformist. The DarkMatter, queer, Judith Butler side is more radical. "No, I don't want state legitimation. I shouldn't [have to] be married to you to be allowed to be in the hospital room when our child is born. I shouldn't need to prove..." I think it's saying love exists outside of the state. I would even argue that the state is antithetical to love. Political queerness versus LGBTQ equality, which is so centered around marriage and anti-hate crime laws, which are pretty ineffective. That's pretty mainstream. Queer is a refusal to conform, is questioning the very basis of state authority and state legitimation and heterosexual relationship norms.

Jessica perceives *queer* as differing from *LGBT* in that LGBT rights movements are interested in facilitating gay assimilation into mainstream society and politically queer projects are interested in altering the core structures of society. In Jessica's view, *LGBT* is used to symbolize the neoliberal gay politics that Lisa Duggan observed in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Duggan 2003). That Judith Butler falls on the "queer politics" side shows the connections between

academic and political understandings of *queer*. John, Keenen, Simone, and Eliza also described *LGBT* and *queer* as being distinct on the basis of differing political agendas.

Riley and T, however, complicate this binaristic understanding of *queer* and *LGBT*, questioning the categorization of certain non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people as more assimilationist than others on the basis of these labels. Riley argues that distinguishing between *queer* and *LGBT* on the basis of radicalness is ahistorical, and that *queer*'s primary use as an identity label, not as a relational term, prevents *queer* from being used in ways that actually mean non-normative.

Riley: Yeah, I feel like sometimes we pretend [LGBT and queer] are [different], but like, I'm pretty skeptical. Like, I don't know, there was that meme going around where it's like, 'not gay, as in the supreme court gave me my rights to get... you know like... queer as in like, trans women throwing bricks gave me my right to get married.' And it's like, like, you can make that argument without attaching it to the words gay and queer, right? And also, it's really ahistorical to attach it to the words gay and queer, because like, I mean I'm not a historian, but I really doubt that that little, like, skirmish was going on during Stonewall, right? Like some people were gay and some people were queer and some people were trying...like, no, they were all queer.

But the idea that gay has become the assimilationist word or like, LGBT is assimilationist politics is like, really really condescending, I think. I mean, there definitely are people for whom queer is still a slur, but those people are now framed as gay assimilationists or whatever, when, I don't know, I feel like standing your ground and living in a place in which queer is still a slur is like kind of not really assimilationist...is kind of like, pretty queer. Even the fact that queer can be added onto the end of LGBT-Q means that the idea that we're not doing identity politics when

we say queer is dubious, right, like, cuz it... we are doing identity politics. The identity is queer. I mean, the idea is queer is a relationality not an identity is... It's like, maybe it once was, or maybe it should be or whatever, but it, it is an identity.

Riley addresses the commonly circulating Internet meme type with the structure “not gay as in _____, but queer as in _____.” These types of memes enforce a distinction between *gay* and *queer*, with *queer* framed as the favorable, more radical, non-normative term. Riley feels that assigning these viewpoints to the words *gay* and *queer* limits an understanding that these terms change over time, and the political actions that people were doing in the past and continue to do today are not contingent on the use of these terms. Additionally, Riley pushes back against the assertion that *queer* is “more radical,” explaining that its use as an identity term doesn’t leave room for it to be used as a relational term meaning non-normative.

Riley, who grew up in a rural conservative area, explains that *queer*’s ability to function as a relational term is moot because *queer*’s meaning as non-normative can only refer to specific situations. Riley points out that someone who doesn’t use the word *queer* because it is a slur where they are from may perhaps be in a more “queer” position in that they are non-normative within their context, but the fact that current understandings of *queer* wouldn’t apply to that person makes Riley skeptical of *queer*’s ability to function as relational. Riley is concerned that operating as if *queer* is liberated and relational simply results in condescension towards those who still think of *queer* as a slur.

In a comment that diverges from but compliments Riley’s point, T states that there is a difference between normative and anti-normative non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people, but T wonders about the utility of emphasizing that divide.

T: Older activists have told me that there's kind of a divide. Like, queer is kind of a different identity than gay, like, it skews younger, and more politically conscious and radicalized, and I feel really complicated about that. Like, there's, the idea that queerness as an identity is inherently political. Like, that's cool, but that implies that you have to be political to be queer. And like, I don't know, I just feel so complicated about that! Like I feel fine saying my identity is inherently political, 'cause I feel like it is. I make it so. I mean, I think of everything as political. I don't know, I'm very much of a, "everything I do is radical" kind of person. Like, when I get dressed in the morning, I'm subverting the gender binary and messing with people's expectations. And all of my relationships are subverting like, heteronormativity and queering whatever the fuck.

But like, I also know lesbians who are not political. Their identity is not inherently radical. I'm thinking of a woman I worked with. She was super middle of the road. She played softball in college. She's training to be a medical assistant, or physician's assistant. But all she wants is to live in her house with her wife and their white picket fence and their dog... You know? She just wants to live the normal life. And like, while her priorities and what she wants from a queer community are clearly different from mine because, I don't know, I want to talk about deconstructing the gender binary, she's part of my community. She has to be. Like, we can't just throw her out. Because unfortunately, she still does face homophobia. Like, she has, if not the same risk, then a similar risk of getting fired from her job or getting harassed on the street or whatever, as I do. So, ok maybe not because I'm visibly gender non-conforming. ...It feels really elitist and classist and just...generally bullshit to be like, 'this identity is inherently political. Like, the mainstream homonormative gays are our enemy? That feels so shortsighted

and shitty. And I don't know, I feel like we here at Oberlin College imagine that homophobia has ended because it's not as much of a thing here, but it hasn't. It won't soon. Like, hate crimes are like.... Gay men, cis gay men are still among the most targeted groups, hate crime-wise. It's still pretty dangerous, and I think we forget that when we're like, 'cis gay men have so much privilege.' Like, yeah, if they live in one of ten places in the country, and that's just in the United States. Like, otherwise, it's pretty fucking dangerous for them to be out.

T questions the productivity of using *queer* to distinguish between “normative” and “non-normative” people, because even the “normative” gay people experience continue to experience marginalization, just as much or more than those who are “non-normative” in some circumstances. T argues that alienating non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people who are interested in living “homonormative” lifestyles ignores the experiences of discrimination and microaggressions that they will likely continue to experience as non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people. T’s point serves as a reminder that marginalized people are always already politicized whether or not they try to live in normative ways.

T’s point leads to the question of what is lost and what is gained when people who have normative, mainstream lifestyles and politics identify as *queer* because they are non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender. If queer ceases to mean non-normative, then an opportunity to use marginalized identity to make a case for altering societal norms is perhaps lost. If queer remains full of left political implications, non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people with different political views could become even more polarized, and the similar experiences of marginalization that people have may be minimized, as T mentioned above.

Queer's dual definitions of non-normative and non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender allow for debates between the perspectives that Riley and Jessica's comments represent. Jessica and several other participants emphasize "non-normative" as *queer's* meaning, saying that *queer* provides an important distinction between assimilationist and anti-assimilationist politics of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people. Riley believes that *queer* really means non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender, and raises concerns that viewing *queer* as relational and anti-normative when it really functions as an identity term inaccurately positions people who don't identify as queer as assimilationist, and falsely inflates *queer's* political potential. Jessica and Riley's perspectives describe the struggle that *queer* embodies as a term with dual, clashing meanings: these tensions point to the larger struggles of a section of the population that is still marginalized but is experiencing increased acceptance. T wonders at the utility of framing some non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people as assimilationist and others as radical, concerned that this way of thinking defers attention from the issue that non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people experience similar marginalization (albeit, to varying degrees) regardless of their political views.

Rifts between different groups of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people on the basis of arguments about political strategy are not new; these debates can be traced back into the mid- to late-20th century. However, the repeal of anti-sodomy laws in 2003, the allowance of open military service for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in 2010, and the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, among other legal changes, create a current political moment in which the possibility of "gay assimilation" becomes much more relevant. *Queer* stands as a symbolic marker at the heart of this debate, and its ambiguous meaning points to the ambiguous and debated answer to questions about the political position of non-heterosexual and non-

cisgender people as marginalized people with growing rights. As Margaret noted, “it’s an interesting period of non-consensus,” not only about which umbrella term is favored by non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people, but about what the political (or apolitical) goals of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people should be. Overall, *queer* lies at the center of these debates, embodying the crisis inherent in the question of what happens when a group that is non-normative becomes partially and tacitly accepted into normative culture.

Queer Community

In this chapter, I explore my finding that, at Oberlin, dual colloquial uses of *queer* as non-normative and non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender work to simultaneously destabilize and stabilize notions of identity. Because *queer* functions as an identity category, specifically for a marginalized group of people, many people have a stake in demarcating the boundaries of it, for better or for worse; in this way, *queer* may be as rigid or stable as any other, more specifically defined identity category. However, internally, *queer* destabilizes normative categories of gender and sexual orientation by facilitating individual explorations of gender identity and sexual orientation that move beyond binary gender.

The broadness of the “queer umbrella” makes room for people with non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities that have not historically been recognized under past labels (such as lesbian and gay), while also creating debates about belonging and acceptance that sometimes result in exclusion of people deemed “on the edge” of queerness. It is *queer’s* broadness as a word that can refer to many different people that allows for its dual definitions as a fixed identity label and relational term signifying opposition to norms to clash and coexist within one word.

Can there be a queer community?

I asked participants if they had heard the words “queer community,” and how they interpret that phrase. All Oberlin participants had heard the phrase before, but participants have many different interpretations of what the phrase means and the ways in which notions of queer community can enable and discourage inclusion and exclusion of certain groups of people. The disparate interpretations of queer community set up this chapter by showcasing the ways in which a vague, broadly defined term results in many different understandings of the kinds of community that can form around the term, or the questioning of the ability for community to form in the first place.

Some participants, like Alton, envision queer community as a network in which people subtly recognize their similarities on the basis of identity.

Alton: I kind of think of it [queer community] more as a web of sorts, where you kind of know who people are, and then you'll maybe give them a head nod. Or during class, you maybe make eye contact with them when someone's saying something homophobic, or you know what I mean? Things like that, where it's not like, wanna come over and chill? It's just a general feeling of being part of something larger. Or at least that's what my view on the thing is.

Alton views queer community as a recognition of similarity based on certain shared experiences, but not as a social network in which most individuals are explicitly connected to one another.

Others, however, questioned whether queer community is possible. T wondered whether queer community is possible because queer as an umbrella term covers such a broad group of people:

T: People use it a lot, I feel like, at Oberlin. Which is funny, because I don't necessarily feel like the queer community is really a... it's certainly not a thing worldwide or nationwide. I'm not even sure it's a thing at Oberlin College. Just because that's so broad. There are so many people.

Wolf agreed with this sentiment, adding:

Wolf: [laughs] I have a lot of feelings about this, because I don't think there's really a queer community [at Oberlin,] because so many people are queer.

The sheer amount of people who identify as queer at Oberlin, as well as the amount of people who can be considered queer makes Riley question the use of the word *community* to describe queer people at Oberlin, suggesting that community involves a certain amount of cohesion, interpersonal connection or friendship, and shared meeting space.

Riley: I mean, it's not really a community, right? It really seems like, if it was a community, it would be a very sad one. And like, I don't feel like it needs to be, right? Like, I don't have this idea that the fact that Oberlin doesn't have a singular queer community that meets in one space and everyone knows each other is a bad thing. I mean, people know certain other queers, in their

sort of like, sections. I've felt a sense of community at Oberlin, but it doesn't come out of the word queer, or out of like, queerness as a singular population. So yeah, I think there's kind of a mismatch there. I'm trying to think words from academia that you could use instead of community. Like, public, right? The "Oberlin queer public," or something.

In some ways, Alton's belief that community involves "a general feeling of being part of something larger," coincides with the loose use of the phrase "queer community" with which T, Wolf, and Riley take issue. "Community," in this sense, is perhaps not so much a physical space or even a group of people who know and connect with one another. Riley's critique of the phrase *queer community* speaks to this linguistic mis-match (using the term "community" when perhaps "people" or some other term is more appropriate.)

Like other participants, Simone questions whether queer community exists at Oberlin, but notes ways in which people strive to create community, and reasons why that is important to her and others.

Simone: Yeah, I definitely hear that word around Oberlin. I don't know if it's really a real thing in Oberlin. I think it's kind of like what you make of it. If you have the ability and resources to cultivate a queer community for yourself, that's great. I don't think it's something you can just tap into at Oberlin necessarily. Just because you identify as queer doesn't mean you have the same...I don't know. There are a lot of queer people who have totally different lifestyles and totally different ideas of what community means. It's a really beautiful idea, but I think having a community also comes from a lot more than just a shared identity. There's a lot to be in solidarity about, with identifying as queer, but I don't really know if that's a huge driving force of

any queer community at Oberlin. It's more about just being inclusive to people that maybe don't really feel comfortable with their queerness or have come from places where it's like...Or it's very new to them. The Multicultural Resource Center does some queer stuff, but I don't really think it exists that much outside of the college's construction of support systems for the queer folks, which also is pretty inadequate. But I don't know, I would say that I have a queer group of friends at Oberlin. There's a lot of people I hang out with that are queer. I actually wish there was more of a community. Some of the ways I try to foster that is having events and things where a lot of queer people I know are invited.

Simone notes that inclusion of those who are discovering their queerness or feel uncomfortable with their queerness is an important aspect of queer community.

Wolf adds an understanding of queer community that, like Alton's, is less about specific friendships and more focused on a shared label and similar experiences among people who may not necessarily have close interpersonal relationships:

Wolf: I have seen it [queer community] used, mostly around Oberlin or queer groups on other campuses. And the way that I interpret it is not necessarily, "people who identify as queer, come to this!" It's more about acceptance. And I hesitate to say that, because like, allyship is kind of an interesting topic. But I think building a queer community is building a community of acceptance where many different identities that may fall under the word queer can be talked about, can be discussed, and can be accepted.

Wolf and Simone's assertions that queer community is about inclusion and acceptance point to a core issue of queer as a broad, ambiguous umbrella term. If queer community is about acceptance, where are the boundaries or limits of this acceptance? Can anyone be welcomed in? Those who fall into the same broad category must navigate the potential for inclusion and difficulties of exclusion that arise from a term so vague that it is unclear who is or is not a part of it.

Inclusion and empowerment.

Queer facilitates the expansion of the limits of gender identity and sexual orientation through its oppositional relationship with normativity. Within the categories of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender, *queer* challenges binaristic and fixed notions of gender identity and sexual orientation, making room for fluid sexualities and gender identities and conceptions of attraction and gender beyond the oppositional categories of "man" and "woman." In this way, *queer* includes people who may have previously lacked any suitable identity labels before, or may have been questioned from within communities of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people. S, B, Alton, Wolf, Riley, John, Katherine, and Margaret all mention that *queer* allows for inclusion of people who may not feel comfortable labeling themselves with other existing terms.

People who don't feel comfortable under other labels, particularly non-binary people and people with complex and fluid sexualities, are accepted under queer, and many feel more comfortable using queer than other labels. *Queer* allows people who might have been on the edges of other labels (or might not have fit into any label) before to have a place in communities of non-cisgender and non-straight people.

In discussing the inclusion and exclusion of people with gender identities and sexual orientations that have been included under current understandings of *queer* but were not named in the same way before, I must state that there were people who could be described with the anachronistic labels of “non-binary” and “trans” within lesbian and gay communities of the past. More recent conceptions of sexual orientation and gender identity as separate have caused these groups to be seen as distinct. Someone who may have called themselves a “stone butch” in the past might now refer to themselves as “non-binary,” “trans-masculine/trans-man,” or “genderqueer,” today. New labels make way for a rethinking of identity and connections or barriers between groups of people; however, thinking that “there have always been non-binary people” is ahistorical and centers the “modern” version of sexual orientation-related identity politics. People alter the frameworks through which they understand sexuality and gender identity when new conceptions of identity emerge and new identity categories are made available (Foucault 1978). Therefore, people couldn’t have conceived of non-binary identity before the emergence of the term; they conceived of themselves in ways that are perhaps similar to what is now understood as non-binary, but in the terms of their culturally and temporally specific context. So, it’s not necessarily that non-binary people were necessarily “excluded” from gay and lesbian communities in the past; now, the proliferation of new labels for every nuanced different identity has created a different type of specificity than what existed 20-30 years ago. However, norms within queer communities about certain “more correct” ways to be queer existed then (Halperin 1995; Jagose 1996; Walters 1996), and continue to exist today. Currently, the implications of broadness and inclusivity within *queer* extend specifically to non-binary gender identities and fluid sexualities that don’t fit neatly into the categories of bisexual, lesbian, or gay.

Many participants described their sexual orientations as bisexual, but often preferred the word *queer* over bisexual because they felt bisexual does not acknowledge the complexity of their particular experience of attraction. S, a bisexual cisgender woman, uses *queer* to highlight the fluidity of her attraction and to more explicitly include non-binary people in the range of people she is attracted to.

S: [Queer] just means that my sexuality is super fluid. And like, I do think that allows for recognition that it's gonna change, also. Sometimes I'm more attracted to masculinity, and other times I'm more attracted to femininity, and like, that's just the way it is. I do think that most of the bisexual people I know, or the non-gay or non-straight people I know prefer queer [to bisexual] because it allows for that level of fluidity and also like, allows somebody to go beyond a binary definition of bisexuality.

In explaining that *queer* “allows somebody to go beyond a binary definition of bisexuality,” S accesses notions of *queer* that seek to disrupt normative structures, including binary understandings of gender. She feels comfortable using *queer* because it involves people of all genders, including non-binary people, in the range of people who she could potentially be attracted to.

Additionally, several participants explained that they came to identify with *queer* because they wanted to leave room for the possibility of new experiences of attraction, and felt that other labels limited this possibility. Alton explained:

Alton: So I thought I was bi first. Then I thought I was a lesbian. And then I was like, this is so frustrating, I don't want to put myself in a box. Because then every time I got attracted to someone that I wasn't 'supposed to be attracted to,' I was like, 'wahh!' and everything was upheaved or whatever. So I was like, it just seems way easier to be like, 'I'm queer.' And then figure it out as I go.

Alton's transmasculine gender identity also influenced their use of *queer*, because identities like bisexual and lesbian didn't include their own gender identity or the gender identities of the people who they might potentially be attracted to. B, who also went through a process of coming out as bi and then wondering if she was lesbian, named similar reasons as Alton for ultimately identifying as queer.

Wolf, a trans man who came out as gay after transitioning, explains that his discover of his sexual orientation allowed him to explore non-normative gender expression:

Wolf: When I came out as trans, I tried to adopt a lot of hypermasculine stereotypes, because that's how I knew what masculinity was. When I came out as gay, I didn't really know how to put that in context of being hypermasculine, so I just ignored that identity, [gay], until I became more comfortable with my masculinity, and then started to explore that. And I would regard that as queering my gender identity and gender expression.

Wolf's understanding of *queer* as non-normative served as a tool that allowed him to further explore his gender identity and expression beyond binaristic notions of masculinity. For Wolf, his dual definitions of *queer* as non-heterosexual and non-normative caused him to bring

elements of femininity into his gender expression, therefore “queering” notions of masculinity by making his understanding of masculinity non-normative.

S, Alton, and Wolf each explain the ways in which identifying with the word *queer* allowed them to expand their sexual orientations and gender identities beyond normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. Normative conceptions of sexuality and gender conceive of gender identity and sexual orientation as fixed and binaristic, and participants use *queer* to conceive of gender identity and sexual orientation as fluid and non-binaristic. In this way, *queer* legitimizes certain identities that have been delegitimized by LGBT communities in the past. However, this expansion of gender and sexuality and deconstructing of binaries that *queer* promotes still ultimately exists within the larger umbrella of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender, a broad but still limited category. Because this category has boundaries, those at the edges of *queer* are questioned by those who exist comfortably within the category of *queer*. The next section examines the ways in which *queer*’s broadness and multiple definitions, which allow for inclusion, can also paradoxically contribute to exclusion.

Exclusion and erasure.

In this section, I note the patterns that arise as participants grapple with concerns about exclusion and belonging. Participants explain that non-binary people who were assigned female at birth must engage in a certain degree of masculine gender presentation to be believed as non-binary, and bisexual attraction is sometimes questioned and often erased, even as the queer umbrella seems to make more room for bisexual and non-binary people—groups that have historically been excluded or rendered invisible in gay communities. Participants disagree about whether cisgender and heterosexual people who experience non-normative sexual desires or lack

of desires can be considered *queer* or not. Themes of androcentrism and biphobia emerged as the elements of exclusion most commonly discussed by Oberlin participants.

Based on participants' opinions and observations, I find that *queer's* fixed, stable definition as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender allows for exclusion, despite the inclusion that its use as non-normative allows. *Queer's* broadness facilitates both the growth of a larger community, resulting in inclusion, and the fear that the community might grow too large, resulting in exclusion.

Many participants mentioned that masculinity is considered more attractive than femininity among many assigned female at birth people at Oberlin. Alton, who is queer and transmasculine, described their own experience with transitioning. They noticed a change based on attention they received on an anonymous compliment-posting student-run Facebook page called Oberlin Crushes.

Alton: There's a big complaint in the afab [assigned female at birth] community that masculinity is valued as more queer than femininity, and that people feel a pressure to be more masculine, and more masculine is attractive, and that sort of thing. And I've also noticed that, I've talked to... I find this really fascinating... I talked to...myself, obviously, [laughs] and two other transmasculine people about our experiences specifically with Oberlin Crushes and attention received pre- versus post-transition. And we all had never gotten an Oberlin Crush before. And then they poured in after we transitioned. So I think there is a fetishization of masculinity, or just a valuing of it as hot and transgressive, or... I don't really know where it comes from.

Alton noticed that people found them more attractive once they began transitioning. B, a queer cisgender woman with masculine gender presentation, experiences attention similar to the attention Alton describes because of her appearance. B also notes that gender non-conformity in people assigned male at birth is not viewed in the same way as gender non-conformity in people assigned female at birth. This selective attraction to and validation of people on the basis of masculinity reflects an androcentrism inherent in Western patriarchal society. Additionally, trends of selective attraction to masculine afab people maintain a focus on gender assigned at birth as a core factor in determining attraction, which clashes with the ways in which *queer* as non-normative subverts the gender binary. Non-binary people who don't fit this mold sometimes feel they are "not queer enough," or aren't queer in the "right ways."

Just as androcentrism within Oberlin's queer community produces the notion that there are certain "correct ways" to be non-binary, biphobia makes bisexual people feel that they are not attracted to people of the same gender enough or in the right ways. Katherine spoke to this concern of being thought of as "not queer enough" (or not being believed as queer) from her own experience:

Katherine: Theoretically, the boundaries are very broad, and theoretically, people are willing to get really broad and inclusive. People really don't always love being more inclusive. Then in other ways, people really don't love being exclusive, and I think that in practice, who can claim the label queer here is very narrow.

I wouldn't have even referred to myself as queer until this year. I went to my first Queerbeers this year. Even though all of my friends always went to Queerbeers, and were like, "We're queer." And I had a moment where...so, I was in a relationship with a woman over the

summer, and then wasn't, because I'm here not there, and then I was like, "Oh, I like, want to have a crush on someone," and my friend who is not straight and is non-binary was like, "Well? Like, it's time for you to have a girl-crush."

I was like, "I don't need to have a girl-crush." And those small constant reminders are things that I'm like, OK. On the one hand, I do hold a lot of privilege. It's dumb for me to be like, "Stop doing that," but also there's a reason why I didn't feel like I could go to Queerbeers until this year, until my friends had seen me being in a relationship with a woman. It was like, "Oh no. You're not queer enough," and I think that rhetoric or understanding, or even the way that you present yourself, I normally present myself as like, very femme, and people are like, "Well, no." [laughs] Even if there's so much dialogue around like, "Oh. Everyone can come." But not really.

Katherine's experience highlights the ways in which *queer* is implicitly used to refer to and enforce same-gender desire and gender non-conformity in some circumstances, maintaining same-gender desires as more visible and favored even though bisexuality is technically included within *queer*, which hypothetically allows for inclusion of sexual orientations that involve a range of sexual desires, unlike *gay* or *lesbian*. Katherine's discomfort with going to QueerBeers, a queer-only night at the student dance hall on campus, shows the ways in which biphobia limits the way she moves through time and space. S and Eliza, both femme, bisexual cis women, also attest to the stigma and erasure they experience based on those identities.

Eliza explains that she has known people who are drawn to *queer* because of the stigma associated with identifying as bisexual; bisexuals are perhaps more validated under the label *queer* because it is a label they share with gay men and lesbians, but their identities and

experiences are also erased through the vastness of *queer* as a common label and through alienating and pressuring mechanisms from gay and non-binary friends of bisexuals.

Uses of *queer* as an identity descriptor today tend to be paradoxically inclusive and exclusive of bisexuality (which I am considering within this section to include fluid sexual attraction and attraction to non-binary people, for the sake of simplicity), bicuriosity, and general “questioning” of sexuality.

In Pat Califia’s 1983 essay, *Gay Men, Lesbians, and Sex: Doing it Together*, Califia describes the ways in which the “new” movement-oriented notions of gayness and lesbianism consisted of greater suspicion and scrutiny of one’s attraction to those of their same gender with the goal of creating a united in-group around sexual orientation identity. Califia explains that this movement-oriented shaping of sexual orientation conflicted with earlier “bar culture,” in which anyone who was interested would self-selectively make their way to the lesbian bar, and wouldn’t be questioned about their level of attraction to women and men or their amount of sexual experience with women. Critiquing the emergence of politically incentivized, more rigid boundaries of the “gay rights movement” definition of gay and lesbian, Califia argues that “in the movement, people insist on a kind of purity that has little to do with affection, lust, or even political commitment. Gayness becomes a state of sexual grace, like virginity. A fanatical insistence on one hundred percent exclusive, same-sex behavior often sounds to me like superstitious fear of contamination or pollution” (Califia 1983: 94). This skepticism towards bisexuality, or any type of same-gender desire that isn’t purely monosexual, is perhaps rooted in a combination of fear, resentment, and a belief in the truth of a certain brand of identity politics that persists today.

B speaks to the ways in which exclusion and erasure within the *queer* umbrella stem from the broadness of the term, which creates this fear:

B: When straight couples started to use the term partner, and my parents have talked a lot about how that was frustrating to them because that used to be like, an indicator of somebody who was like you. But then when like, a woman with short hair talks about her partner now, I mean, you have no idea if it's a man or a woman, or somebody non-binary, or whoever. And you know, like, looks in general and haircuts and clothing choices that sort of stemmed from the queer community that become more mainstream makes it harder to kind of discern like, who, quote unquote, "your people" might be. I hear, you know, 'they're teasing us' or 'they're tricking us.' And I have definitely been guilty of doing that. Um, and it's kind of messed up. But it's also interesting because it all comes from, we want to know who our communities are. And anything that is frustrating us figuring out who our communities are, like, makes us, you know, jump to judgments and criticism.

B, who has lesbian moms, describes what she observes as the mainstreaming of gender non-conforming word choice and styles that originated among non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people as markers of same gender attraction and shared lifestyle, noting the difficulty of finding friends and people to date when the markers of shared experience start to change or disappear. B notes the urge that many people feel to look for shared community on the basis of marginalized identity and the frustration emerges from not finding that community.

Jessica explains her own instincts to "gatekeep," or determine whether someone should or should not be allowed to identify as *queer* or go to queer events. Jessica's desire to gatekeep is

rooted in the imbalance of experiences of marginalization within queer communities, a result of the term's broadness and ambiguity.

Jessica: I never want to police anyone's identity and be, "You're not actually queer." There are some people who were like, "I'm queer." I'm like, "OK." I don't really know if it matters if someone's like queer, but they're not actually queer, bi, like...I don't know. Actually, I'm still working through that because I want to give everyone the room to experiment and define themselves. I know it's probably fucked up to exclude people to be like, "Oh, you've never been in like, a homosexual or like somewhat of a queer relationship therefore you can't count." Like, "if you've never been called a dyke..." ...[Queer's] a general term. It's a gatekeeping term and my instinct to police its use is wanting to gatekeep, but I've also been questioning, what's the value of gatekeeping? What does that do for me? Especially, is it necessary here in a space that is so accepting? I don't really feel like it is. And how can we "enforce" that without policing? It's complicated.

Jessica mentions same-gender relationships and experiences of discrimination as factors that legitimize one's claim to the word *queer*, from her perspective. However, she questions her own instincts to gatekeep, wondering about the utility of excluding people because they don't experience queerness in the same way as she does. She also considers the context of Oberlin, in which many people are non-heterosexual and non-cisgender, and identifying as queer is normalized and accepted.

In many ways, *queer* as it is currently used by Oberlin students provides a convenient and inclusive term that carves out space for visibility and acceptance of people with non-normative

gender identities and sexual orientations. However, *queer* is not an equalizer. The ambiguity of *queer* as an umbrella term masks the differences between people with vastly different identities and experiences beneath the queer umbrella and therefore allows certain dynamics of erasure and exclusion to play out among queer people on campus. The use of *queer* as non-normative, and its broadness as an identity category, allow *queer* to make room for identities that have been previously excluded or made invisible. The use of *queer* as a fixed identity category creates dynamics of exclusion and erasure within the queer umbrella. *Queer's* broadness causes this identity term to be particularly messy and unwieldy, but I argue that the messiness and contradictions found within *queer* allow for dialogue and a constant reevaluation of individuals' visions for their own community.

Contextualizing Queer

The vast majority participants didn't use *queer* before coming to Oberlin, but all Oberlin participants started to identify with the term, to varying degrees, after arriving in Oberlin. This notable trend highlights the importance of cultural context to language usage, and the ways in which *queer* means something different in Oberlin than in other places in the U.S., and, conversely, that other words may occupy a similar definitional/cultural position in other places that *queer* does in Oberlin. This chapter will discuss my finding that the ways in which Oberlin's particular academic and political context facilitates uses of *queer* are particular to the spatial, temporal, and cultural context of Oberlin College and other similar contexts.

Participants' definitions and uses of *queer* heavily reflect their upbringing and college experience. People I interviewed who came from rural or suburban areas tended to have not heard *queer* used as an identity label before coming to Oberlin; all interviewees who think of

queer's uses at Oberlin as common are from urban, progressive areas. Several participants observed that *queer* seems to be used more frequently in academic, politically left spaces among people of generally higher socioeconomic status, possibly explaining certain participants' views that the use of *queer* as an identity term is widespread and other participants' views that it is used rarely outside of Oberlin.

In comparing their experience in their hometown to their experience in Oberlin, Riley noted that *queer* translates certain types of cultural cues about gender and sexuality in Oberlin that might be translated through other words elsewhere. Therefore, although the word *queer* itself may not be used in other places, a different word or phrase may be used to capture the same or similar meanings that *queer* conveys in the context of Oberlin College.

Overall, participants' mixed responses about the popularity and uses of *queer* outside of Oberlin highlight the cultural, spatial, and temporal specificity of Oberlin's *queer*, even if *queer* is used in similar ways in some other places. Additionally, although no two words can be entirely synonymous in connotation, the explicit and implicit meanings of *queer* may be translated in other places through other words and phrases entirely.

Characterizing the environment: where are people using queer as an identity?

Comments from several interviewees indicate that elements of *queer*'s use at Oberlin may not be entirely specific to Oberlin, but may be represented in other places around the U.S. T heard *queer* while growing up in Northampton, MA, the "lesbian capital of America," and Charlie hears *queer* in Brooklyn as a young adult going to events while he's home in New York. S, Keenen, John, and Wolf all describe their interpretations of the characteristics of environments

where *queer* is most popular. All four participants associate the use of *queer* with politically left environments, high socioeconomic status, and educational attainment. I add an observation that most of the participants who heard *queer* before Oberlin are originally from urban areas. I suggest that not all, but at least some of these four characteristics—political leftness, high socioeconomic status, postsecondary education and urbanness—must be present for *queer* to become a catchall umbrella term within a particular setting.

Wolf explained that because socioeconomic factors and political views are correlated with educational attainment, and *queer* is frequently used in academic environments, uses of *queer* are divided along these lines.

Wolf: I think a lot of using the word queer as an identity comes with education, and that creates both a socioeconomic and a political divide. Which, sucks, but what can you do about it? So I feel like the word queer is used more as a slur in areas that maybe don't have college campuses or are not wealthy areas.

Wolf also hypothesizes that *queer* is more likely to be used as a slur in places that are not wealthy and don't have college campuses because of the ways in which these factors create an environment favorable for the spread of reclaimed *queer*, and the absence of these factors would result in the absence of that bias. Many participants attest that the academic use of *queer* within queer studies classes influences colloquial uptake and conversations about *queer* on campus, supporting Wolf's hypothesis.

John, a 4th year transfer student from New York, NY, observed uses of *queer* in other places that share similarities with uses of *queer* at Oberlin, stating that Oberlin is not the only

place in which *queer* carries certain culturally-specific implications. John's comment further solidifies the notion that there are certain conditions that allow for the reclaiming of *queer* in specific environments.

John: I think there's definitely like, a unifying nature of the word queer in other places. I don't think queer in other places differs all that much from Oberlin. I think there's definitely a unifying, like I said, politics, a unifying aesthetic, a unifying, yeah those are the two main things. Um, definitely it's not as predominant as at Oberlin. 'Cause I mean, I think queer definitely predominates over gay at Oberlin, but everywhere else, like, anywhere else, doesn't even come close to the amount of numbers of people who use queer [at Oberlin]. Or of queer visibility.

John's perception is likely specific to the environments that he has been a part of, which fall under many of the characteristics of environments in which *queer* is commonly used. He does state, however, that *queer* is still used much more frequently at Oberlin than in other places in which it's used.

The Internet, however, serves as a confounding factor, and might cause people who are from rural, conservative, lower-income, and educationally underprivileged backgrounds to identify as *queer*. Many participants mentioned that *queer* is used frequently within blogging communities like Tumblr, which might provide an introduction to *queer* as a reclaimed identity term for someone who might be physically isolated from places in which they might hear *queer* used. Oberlin participants who mentioned Tumblr said that they feel the use of *queer* on Tumblr is similar to the ways in which it's used at Oberlin, but that there is more acknowledgement that

queer might still be a slur for some people, and that one should be cautious in using it, for that reason. Eliza explained her perspective:

Eliza: When I see it used on the Internet, I mostly see it used in the same way, just as a not straight but not necessarily having to explain that way. I see more people maybe explaining why they use queer or being like, "I could also identify as this." Also, just on Tumblr, I've definitely seen things come up like, "Don't ever use queer. It's offensive. You should never use it." Other people being like, "No, if you personally feel like using it, that's fine. Don't keep other people from reclaiming it," and that whole discourse I've seen pop out on my dash a few times.

Eliza's observation, which she shares with many other participants, indicates that people do use *queer* as a reclaimed identity label on Tumblr, and possibly on other similar blogs or communities.

Participants comments about the factors which contribute to *queer*'s use as an umbrella term were often consistent with one another, indicating that *queer* may be used more frequently as a reclaimed umbrella term in places that are politically left, have higher-income residents, have academic environments, are urban, or any combinations of these factors. Exposure to *queer* on the Internet provides another factor that may circumvent some of these other factors.

Hometown versus Oberlin

Most participants, including Keenen, Peyton, Katherine, and Riley, hadn't heard *queer* used as an individual or umbrella identity before coming to Oberlin. These participants knew that

queer was a slur, but rarely or never heard it used at all. Some, like Wolf and Eliza, started to hear several people identifying as *queer* by their last year of high school. Several others, Alton and T, who are both from politically left and varying urban environments, had heard *queer* used as an identity while growing up.

Riley's experience attests to the ways in which contextual differences can completely change one's relationship to words, as well as fundamental assumptions and perceptions embodied within those words:

Riley: When I came to Oberlin I identified as gay. And that was like a very factually true thing. So then, at Oberlin, it's like gay people are queer, and other people are queer, and queer is the word, so I started using queer. But I guess I've kind of realized gradually that it wasn't so much that queer means a different thing but that gay means a different thing at Oberlin. Like in my town, just because of the way that people think about people who aren't straight or who are gender deviant is like, it isn't really always so clear, like, the boundaries between gender and sexuality that we're preserving in our language [at Oberlin], even as we try to dismantle those boundaries in other ways.

I feel like in my home town a gay man is not really a man, and I feel like even though people might call that person a man, like, they don't really believe it. Like, something about maleness is like, bound up in fucking women. Like, that's what it means to be a man. And if you don't do that, it's not that you're a woman, it's that you're some kind of failed man, or some other thing that like, isn't quite there. And for me, that's a really queer position to be in. And like, that's something I kind of missed at Oberlin. Because when I was like, "I'm gay," at

Oberlin, people would not get that that was also a gendered thing. And just the way I had lived that, you know?

So like, I had to come up with other words that would translate the ways in which I didn't feel like a man or didn't act like a man, and all of those things would, needed different words at Oberlin, sort of. But saying queer and not gay was just a way, a local way, of not having to like, get into that, and just sort of letting that be.

I can't really draw parallels between what word and what place, but I like that queer creates a mess of gender and sexuality, in the same way that like, at home gender and sexuality could never not be a mess if you weren't straight. So, yeah, I guess it's just a way of not telling people that story.

Riley's experience reveals several important points about the importance of context to worldview and self-understanding. First, efforts to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity and presentation as distinct may have contributed to this Oberlin understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation as separate. Even in the words participants used to describe *queer*—"non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender"—reinforces the distinction between gender and sexual orientation. Sociologist Basil Bernstein theorized that colloquial language shapes and reflects the implicit conventions of each particular social group (Bernstein 1971). Thus, the use of *queer* and language surrounding *queer* influences and is influenced by the social norms of Oberlin College.

Second, Riley's experience highlights the ways in which language meaning is highly determined by context, and even words that may have the same or similar explicit definitions carry different coded connotations in different environments (Bernstein 1971). Upon coming to Oberlin, Riley had to relearn language codes about gender and sexuality that differed between

Oberlin and Riley's hometown, resulting in Riley changing their preferred gender pronouns from "he/him/his" to "they/them/theirs" and using *queer* instead of *gay* in order to translate their gender non-conformity within Oberlin's environment. For Riley, expressing their gender non-conformity in their home town was unavoidable because of the ways in which same-gender attraction acts in conjunction with gender identity and presentation. As Riley stated, if one of the qualifications of manhood is heterosexuality, a gay man can never fully be a "man," and is therefore automatically gender non-conforming.

Riley's experience indicates that there is not one "correct" or "more progressive" way to see gender and sexual orientation, and seeing one way as more "liberated" becomes dangerous, because it erases the lives that people from other places experience and the knowledge and perspective they gain from their experiences, as well as the insight about gender and sexual orientation that they can provide that may otherwise go unconsidered in places like Oberlin. Riley's observation that their experience as "some kind of failed man" in a place where non-straight and non-cis experiences of gender and sexual orientation are definitely not normal or normative is "a really queer position to be in" calls to question understandings of *queer* within Oberlin. Riley's experience as a gay man in their hometown is arguably much more *queer*, or "non-normative," than any experience of non-straightness or non-cisness in Oberlin, where queerness is common and generally accepted. Riley implicitly critiques the dual meanings of *queer*, complicating the notion that identifying as *queer* automatically makes one's position in their environment non-normative.

Case Western Reserve University: a Case study.

Joe and Justo's experiences point to the stark difference between the environment at Oberlin and the environments that Joe and Justo frequent at Case Western Reserve University. Neither Joe nor Justo, the two participants I interviewed from Case Western in Cleveland, OH, hear *queer* as an identity term around campus. They barely hear or see it used in general, but if they do, it is being used to mean "odd" or "strange," its pre-slur, dictionary-sanctioned meaning. Both Justo and Joe mentioned seeing a Q within the LGBTQ acronym on posters around campus, but were unsure whether the Q meant queer or questioning.

Both Joe and Justo said that they were aware of efforts to reclaim *queer*, and understood some of the reasons why one might use *queer* as opposed to other terms, but were unsure of how successful the reclamation efforts would be. Joe, who identifies as a homosexual man, explains his perspective:

Joe: I've read a little bit about the effort to start using [queer] for like, all-encompassing um... I think it was talking about non-gender-binary, non-heterosexual. Being just kind of like a blanket term. I think it would be useful to do that, but I don't know if it's really catching on the way it would need to for like, widespread people to use it. I wouldn't be opposed to it being a blanket term. It would make explaining things a little bit easier sometimes.

Joe has some awareness of the use of *queer* as an umbrella identity label, but not much firsthand experience with the term. His understanding of reclaimed *queer* is very similar to that of reclaimed *queer* at Oberlin, but he only interacted with this definition through briefly reading about it online.

Justo, who identifies as asexual with some heterosexual leanings, doesn't identify as *queer*, and doesn't think that his identity as asexual belongs under the queer umbrella. He thinks that *queer* should go back to meaning weird, because reclaimed *queer* is too ambiguous and hard to define. He was interested, however, in the potential for *queer* to be applied to non-normativity more broadly. He discussed his mixed-race heritage, describing his racial background as queer because it can't fit into any distinct racial categories and goes against normative notions of how race is perceived in U.S. society:

Justo: As far as queer identifying non-normative things, I feel like [queer] should also be used to identify other non-normative... Like, it should be synonymous with weird. That's how I see it being used ideally in the future. I mean, someone could have a queer ethnicity, just a weird ethnicity. Like, my ethnicity. I don't really have one. I know, for example, being black in my family is a recessive gene. Like, when you see him, my dad is black, as dark as the guy behind you, but both of his parents are a cross between my skin color and your skin color. It's very strange. This is a queer ethnicity, honestly, for him and for me. Because how can non-black parents have a black child? What is the real ethnicity?

Justo's ideal vision for uses of *queer* in the future is a vision in which *queer* is synonymous with non-normative, and can be used in many different contexts. *Queer's* lack of establishment within the environments Justo is part of at Case and in his hometown may allow for more creative thought processes about the potential for *queer* in the future.

I can't generalize about the environment at Case based on these two interviews, but I did note that they were slightly similar to one another and both contrasted greatly with Oberlin

understandings of *queer*. Both Joe and Justo were engineering majors, and Joe mentioned that I might be able to find arts and humanities majors at Case who knew more about *queer* as an identity term. Overall, my interviews with Justo and Joe both solidify the cultural specificity of Oberlin as a place where the use of *queer* as an identity term is extremely normalized, showing how different one's understanding of a word can be only a 45 minute drive away.

This chapter highlights the importance of cultural context in shaping understandings of identity and social reality. The words used in Oberlin and their implicit connotations both shape and are shaped by Oberlin's context (Bernstein 1971). The culture that Oberlin students are introduced to and then perpetuate surrounding *queer* is only partially translatable to other parts of the country, through other words. Therefore, all of my findings must be understood within this particular small liberal arts college in which many people come from a background of economic security, come from urban environments, have anti-establishment political views, and are non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender in some way. This context allows for the continual production of *queer* as a word that means both non-normative and non-heterosexual and/or noncisgender, and it also allows for conversations and debates about the potential of *queer's* future.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

At Oberlin, *queer's* ambiguity allows it to be both inclusive and exclusive, politicized and depoliticized, normative and non-normative. Its dual colloquial definitions at Oberlin as “non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual” and “non-normative” contribute to tension as well, causing people to grapple with an identity label that is simultaneously fixed and relational.

This case study that explores the usage rules of *queer* at Oberlin College examines the use of *queer* within a very specific academic, political, and social context. The use of *queer* at Oberlin is salient because similar uses of *queer* may be already emerging in or spreading to other contextually similar places across the U.S., and are already present on some websites. However, the use of *queer* at Oberlin is not representative of its use in many other places across the U.S.

Recommendations

Future research in this area might explore the ways in which queer is (or isn't) used on other college campuses, including other liberal arts schools as well as state schools, technical schools, art schools, and community colleges. To further understand the influence of higher education on identity label choice, future studies could compare people in college to people within the same age group who are not in college. Intergenerational interviews that compare uses of *queer* between older and younger people could help to understand different relationships to *queer* as a reclaimed word. Understanding *queer's* relationship with race, ability, religion, and other factors, both within and outside of Oberlin, would add significant analysis to this study and to future research. Examining trends in the debates and discussions about *queer* in online opinion blogs over time could track shifts in *queer's* popularity and meanings, virtually. Analyzing the reclamation history of *gay* and the emergence and utility of *LGBT* may help contextualize the relationships between these terms and *queer* that I examined within this paper. Further historical research and theorizing about *queer's* relationship to identity politics could also bolster this project and future studies of *queer* and its relationship to social movements.

So What?

Riley explained that if *queer* is an identity term, it doesn't inherently accomplish more than other similar identity terms, such as gay or LGBT. They commented:

Riley: I guess, I feel that there's nothing you can do with the word queer that you can't do without it.

It takes more than the use or rejection of one word to shape a community. It might not matter whether someone refers to a community with *LGBT* instead of *queer*, or if someone says *non-normative* instead as a stand-in for *queer*. *Queer* itself doesn't accomplish political change, or build a stronger community. So why does *queer* matter, if it does matter?

Although *queer* itself doesn't result in stronger community or political change, it remains salient because of the issues of politics and community that it brings to light. Embedded within *queer's* current, dual meanings as a fixed and relational term are all of the exciting and uncomfortable questions that about the meaning of community and the goals of political agendas that emerged through participants' comments. It's easy to conceive of discord as inherently wrong, or as a sign of failed community or confused political causes. However, Amin Ghaziani argues that conflict is an inevitable part of community, and that conflict can actually build successful community (Ghaziani 2008). Ghaziani explains that real community does not come easily, and it doesn't always mean striving for consensus, but instead striving for dialogue. Traditional notions of "perfect community" don't acknowledge suffering as a part of life (Ghaziani 2008).

Queer is fraught with boundary issues and political disagreement, but people keep returning to it. Heated and opposing opinions couldn't exist if people didn't care so deeply about

everything the term embodies, and no one would return to the same communities if they didn't need them. With *queer* in particular, I claim that conflict surrounding a term so broad is inevitable. *Queer*'s multiple meanings and ambiguity encourages a coming together of people with varying levels of marginalization and people with disparate political agendas, welcoming the dissent. *Queer* serves as a constant reminder of tension inherent in existing as marginalized people in a politicized world—the desire to expand ourselves and our society against the need to protect ourselves from our own communities and from our society. The complexity and ambiguity of *queer* doesn't allow us to forget the conflicts and possibilities raging on within our minds, our bodies, and our communities.

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APPENDIX

Recruitment Materials

Email to snowball recruits.

Hi _____,

I'm a GSFS major at Oberlin and I'm interviewing people about their relationships with and perceptions of the word queer for my honors research. I'm contacting you because a friend or acquaintance mentioned you as someone who has a lot of interesting & valuable opinions that relate to this subject, and they suggested that I get in touch with you about this project.

If you have opinions and/or observations you're interested in sharing, I'd love to hear your thoughts! Whether you love queer, hate it, or have complicated feelings about it, there are no wrongs answers.

The interview would be confidential (only I would know that you participated, unless you wanted others to know), and participants can stop the interview at any point or withdraw their completed interview from the study any time before April 5, 2017.

The interview would be audio recorded and would range between 30-60 minutes, depending on how much you want to talk / how much time you have to talk, but would most likely be around 45min.

Please let me know if you're interested or if you have any questions, and/or forward to your friends!!

Thanks!

Maddie

Email to Case Western Reserve University recruits.

Hi all--

I'm a Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist studies major at Oberlin and I'm interviewing college students in Northeast Ohio about their relationships with and perceptions of the word queer for my honors research.

If you have opinions and/or observations you're interested in sharing, I'd love to hear your thoughts! Whether you love queer, hate it, or have complicated feelings about it, there are no wrongs answers.

The interview would be confidential (only I would know that you participated, unless you wanted others to know), and participants can stop the interview at any point or withdraw their

completed interview from the study any time before April 5, 2017. Participants must be between 18 and 24 years old.

The interview would be audio recorded and would range between 30-60 minutes, depending on how much you want to talk / how much time you have to talk, but would most likely be around 45min.

Please let me know if you're interested or if you have any questions, and/or forward to your friends!!

Thanks!

Maddie Batzli

Email to Old Barrows cooperative.

“Hey Bees!

I'm interviewing people about their relationships with and perceptions of the word queer for my honors research. If you have opinions and/or observations you're interested in sharing about queer, I'd love to hear your thoughts!

I am looking for a diversity of opinions, experiences, and identities, so whether you love queer, hate it, or have complicated feelings about it, there are no wrong answers.

The interview would be confidential (only I would know that you participated), and participants can stop the interview at any point and withdraw their interview from the study at any point before April 5, 2017.

The interview would range between 30-60 minutes, depending on how much you want to talk / how much time you have to talk, but would most likely be around 45min.

Please contact me if you're interested, and/or forward to your friends!!

Thanks!

Maddie”

Original Interview Questions

- When was the last time you heard or used the word *queer*? How was it being used?
- How do you generally hear *queer* being used on campus? [More follow up on this later]
- Do you hear *queer* being used in different places in your life, such as where you're from? If so, how is it used?

- Is there anyone, or a group of people, who isn't allowed to use *queer*, or it would be frowned-upon socially for them to use that word?

SELF

- Do you use the word *queer* to describe yourself? Why or why not?
 - [If participant **doesn't identify as queer**, ask:] As someone who doesn't identify as queer, do you reject the use of the word entirely? Would you describe yourself as *queer* in a broader, more general sense, or not?
- [If they **identify as queer**, ask:] How does your identification as queer affect or interact with other aspects of your identity, or how do other aspects of your identity affect your choice to identify as queer or your experience identifying with this term?
- [If they **don't identify as queer**, ask:] Was your choice to not identify as *queer* influenced by any of your other identities?
- [If this question hasn't already been answered through earlier questions, ask:] How do you identify in terms of sexuality and gender? Do you use labels?
 - [Depending on how they answer, ask:] How did you choose those labels/How did you choose not to use labels?
 - [If **participant identifies as queer**, ask:] How does your choice to use the word *queer* relate to your other labels? When do you use *queer* and when do you use other labels?

OTHERS

- Have you heard *queer* used in an **academic** way? If so, how was it used? What do you think about that usage?
- Have you heard *queer* used in **activism**? If so, how was it used? What do you think about that usage?
- Have you heard the words *queer community* used, ever? If so, what did that mean in that context/how did you interpret that, or if you use that term, what does it mean to you?
 - Do you think there is a queer community (or are there queer communities) where you live currently?
 - Who is not allowed to participate in those communities, or who might feel uncomfortable participating in those communities (or community-centered events)? If you don't know, what would you guess?

FUTURE

- This word has been used in many different ways over time. If you had to make a prediction, how would you expect *queer* might be used in the future? How might it be defined by future generations, in various contexts?

Participant Information Chart Part I

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Gender identity	Gender presentation	Cis/trans status	Sexual orientation	Race	Class

			(self-described)				
S	She/her	woman	femme	cis	bisexual	white	
Peyton	Any	genderqueer		Non-binary	pansexual	white	
Keenen	He/him	man		cis	gay	white	
Alton	They/them	transmasculine	masculine	Non-binary	bisexual	white	
B	She/her	woman	masculine	cis	queer	white	
John	He/him	man	masculine	cis	gay	white	Upper middle
Eliza	She/her	woman	femme	cis	Bisexual, queer	white	
T	They/them	Non-binary	Gender non-conforming	Non-binary	bisexual	white	
Simone	She/her	Afab, but not attached to being a woman			queer	white	Upper
Margaret	She/her	woman		trans	lesbian	white	Upper middle
Jessica	She/her	woman		cis	Lesbian/gay	black	Class privileged
Katherine	She/her	woman	femme	cis	Bisexual/queer		
Riley	They/them				queer	white	
Charlie	He/him	man		cis	Gay/queer	white	
Wolf	He/him or They/them	man		trans	Gay/queer		
CASE Justo	He/him	man		cis	Asexual, heterosexual	Mixed, afro-	Lower middle

					leanings	cuban & ukranian	class
CASE Joe	He/him	man		cis	homosexual	white	Middle class

Participant Information Chart Part II

Pseudonym	Class year	Major	Home state	Hometown: polt. views	Hometown: Rural/urban	(Dis)ability	Other
S	4th	GSFS	Missouri		city		
Peyton	3rd	Psychology	Michigan	Conservative/ moderate	Rural/small town		
Keenen	4th	ENVS	NY Suburbs; NY, NY		Suburban; Urban		
Alton	4th	GSFS	DC		urban		
B	4th	Math	Bay Area		Small city		Lesbian moms
John	4th	GSFS	NY, NY		urban		Transfer student
Eliza	4th	Theater	Maryland		urban		
T	2nd	Undeclared	Massachusetts		town	Disabled	Lesbian moms
Simone	3rd	POLT	Washington		urban		Transfer student
Margaret	2nd	TIMARA	Indiana		Suburban		
Jessica	2nd	Undeclared (CAST/SOCI)	Pennsylvania	liberal	urban		
Katherine	4th	History	Massachusetts				
Riley	4th	Composition	Southern California	Extremely conservative	Rural	Able- bodied	Christian

Charlie	2nd	Sociology	NY, NY	progressive	urban		
Wolf	3rd	Biology	Wisconsin	Socialist	urban		Canadian immigrant
CASE Justo	4th	Engineering Physics	Connecticut; NYC, NY		Small city		Raised with Santería; Now Jewish. Hispanic.
CASE Joe	3rd	Chemical Engineering	Pennsylvania		suburban		

Glossary

- afab: Acronym that stands for “assigned female at birth.” Usually used to specify the experience of a transgender person.
- amab: Acronym that stands for “assigned male at birth.” Usually used to specify the experience of a transgender person.
- BDSM: acronym that stands for bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism, but is used as a catchall phrase for many related erotic practices.
- cisgender: describes a person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth
- cis/het: shorthand used to describe people who are cisgender and heterosexual.
- non-binary: broad identity label that can apply to anyone whose gender identity does not fall into the categories of “man” or “woman”
- polyamory: practice of having more than one sexual or romantic partner.
- transgender: describes a person who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. This may mean that the person doesn’t identify with the gender they were assigned at birth

at all, only partially identifies with it, or doesn't identify with any gender, among infinitely more possibilities (besides identifying as cisgender).

- transmasculine: an identity descriptor used by some people to describe the direction in which they are transitioning towards or have transitioned towards. Can refer to non-binary or binary transgender people.

- transfeminine: an identity descriptor used by some people to describe the direction in which they are transitioning towards or have transitioned towards. Can refer to non-binary or binary transgender people.

I adhered by the honor code on this assignment. *Madeline Batzli*