QUEERING AMERICA TODAY: REFLECTIONS AND PRACTICES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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On December 1, 1952, Christine Jorgensen became the first US citizen to undergo sex reassignment surgery. As historian Joanne Meyerowitz (2009) notes in *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (2-4), the redefinition of gender identity, as opposed to biological sex, was the ultimate product of a long process that emerged from the medical discourse of the mid-1950s, in the aftermath of Jorgensen's surgery. Since then, a non-binary understanding of gender has been featured increasingly in an ever-expanding debate on inclusiveness, freedom, and equality in the United States—the same ideals that have been central to US myth-making and identity-formation since the founding of the nation, grounded in the 1776 Declaration of Independence, which asserts that "all men are created equal" with inalienable rights such as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

In embracing the call to freedom and equality, the use of the term 'queer' has significantly evolved during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Used as a slur targeting homosexual people for much of the nineteenth century and the better part of the following, this umbrella term began to be reclaimed by US activists in the late 1980s.[1]

[1] On the history of the use of the term *queer* see: Somerville, Siobhan B, "Queer," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: NYU Press), 187-91.

By overcoming dogmatic definitions of gender and sexuality, queer has offered, and continues to offer, an alternative to the mainstream public discourse centered on binary social hierarchies and heteronormative conventions for LGBTQ+ people. Furthermore, in the past three decades, seminal works by critical theorists—including bell hooks, Teresa De Lauretis, Leo Bersani, Eve Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam, and Roderick Ferguson—have also contributed to challenging prescriptive norms of self-representation. Through their writings, these authors have invited reflections on queer identity and the need to embrace marginality and failure as necessary steps to achieve liberation and recognition.

As hooks and Halberstam have respectively posited, only by "mov[ing] away from the space of binaries" (hooks 2013) and reversing "the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development" (Halberstam 2011, 3) can we create new possibilities and pursue our own true aspirations of freedom and equality. It is in this spirit that this special issue aims to meditate on the ongoing importance of queering US identity—its history, literature, culture, myths—in the present moment.

On September 30, 2022, at the onset of "Queering America: Gender, Sex, and Recognition in U.S. History, Culture, and Literature," the 3rd AISNA Graduates Conference, the members of the organizing committee were particularly excited to host the Graduate Forum's first in-person event we held in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown. By the end of the day, our enthusiasm had turned into something more, as we realized that attendance and engagement had exceeded our expectations. While the event had produced passionate and thought-provoking dialogue among early-career and established researchers from across Europe, its success did not stem only from a need for in-person interactions after too many online meetings, but rather from a shared intent. The conference theme served as an intellectual catalyst, gathering people and critical perspectives revolving around a timely issue: in the COVID era, reflecting on queerness and its liberating potential offered a space to challenge the blatant contradictions and flaws of the neoliberal system that had surfaced during the pandemic. The conference set out to explore whether there is a space in US society for a queerness that seeks liberation and recognition rather than simple admission to the

status quo—and what this implies for the struggle to promote effective social change. As such, our decision to focus on themes of queerness, gender, and sexual identity emerged from a desire to foster meaningful interdisciplinary discussions, encouraging diverse voices and perspectives. We hence invited scholars from across career stages to present the multiple ways in which their research explores the interplay between gender, sex, and recognition, with an eye to the challenge that conceptualizations of queerness pose to the more conservative components of US culture and society, such as institutional religion, the organization of law, the so-called traditional family, as well as founding myths like that of American individualism and the American Dream.

This issue of *JAm It!* builds upon the critical debate that unfolded during the "Queering America" conference and aspires to provide the readers with current critical practices and debates within various fields that use queerness as a critical lens. Two main trends have emerged in the last few decades of scholarship. The first has conceptualized the very word queer as an umbrella term for all non-normative sexual and gender identities, opening up the field to new possibilities of analysis. In literary and cultural studies, this paradigmatic shift is reflected, for example, by paying attention not only to authors and texts, but also to the reader (Sedgwick 1993; Anzaldúa 1991), whose positionality (including their gender identity and sexuality) can influence the interpretation and reception of any particular work. Such critical conversation also warns us that we cannot assume a simple correspondence between sexual identity and a person's subjectivity (Anzaldúa 1991), and likewise, queer does not stand in a simple binary opposition to straight, as Cathy Cohen suggests (1997). Not all instances of heterosexuality are granted the status of normative, especially when concepts like race, social class, and religion are also taken into account. Heteronormativity is a concept that therefore appears in this analytical thread as the real opposite of queer, something that is as much racialized as it is gendered, especially in the United States.

Cohen's observations lead us into a second deployment of *queer*, that is, as an approach that helps us understand normativity itself as "based on interlocking categories of difference and power, including race, caste, indigeneity, gender, class,

nation and religion" (Somerville 2022, 5). Intersectionality and interdisciplinarity are therefore keys in this approach, adding new layers of analysis to previously established academic narratives across scholarly fields. This approach has led to research that analyzes *queer* more in its particular relations to power rather than as a specific identity or an umbrella of identities. The aim of this research is to make visible various practices of liberation and conceptualization of the self in many different historical and cultural contexts, including those that eschew contemporary Western understandings of gender and sex (Golberg and Menon 2005; Dinshaw 2012; Freeman 2010; Freccero 2006). This analytical framework has proven especially useful when *queer* intertwines with concepts like postcolonial and decolonization (Hawley 2001; Asante and Hanchey 2021). Epistemically, moreover, scholars have stressed the need to avoid compartmentalizing queer analysis to the study of a limited set of "legitimate" objects (Butler 1995; Berlant and Warner 1995) and systematizing the approach. If the "uncontainable aspects of queer commentary are its strengths" (Somerville 2021, 7), this concept translates into research that does not bode well with disciplinary norms "founded on divisions between legitimacy and illegitimacy" (Ferguson 2012). Therefore, any attempt to define the field using traditional boundaries becomes exclusionary and partial.

In this spirit of open-endedness, starting from Jorgensen's legacy, and its challenges to our social understanding of sex and gender, the proposals we received allowed us to engage a wide range of research areas and cultural objects. Applying a queer perspective to the fields of history and political science enables research that examines the inclusion and omission of LGBTQ+ representations in archives, museums, narratives, and political discourse; the treatment of LGBTQ+ identities in medicine and body conceptualization; their relation to military history and exclusions from full citizenship; and how movements over time have defined the boundaries of representation in relation to gender, race, and class in an intersectional manner. Further, in the current political landscape: what queer means in our post-Obergefell and post-Trump world, what the inclusion of cis gays and lesbians within the legislative frame of the American family implies for the other identities within the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, any analysis that focuses on queerness must broaden its scope

to include the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world, drawing on critical and postcolonial theories. Since the discourse around queer liberation has often centered on expanding the spectrum of legally recognized rights, it is crucial to also research the legal aspects of these issues in a comparative and interdisciplinary manner. This is especially needed at a time in which too many Western governments appear to be threatening the hard-earned rights of various subjugated groups, promoting conservative and dehumanizing laws. Finally, central to our call was the intent to explore how queerness helps us understand literature and the arts and, vice versa, how they define—and contribute to redefining—queerness, including the ways in which literary texts challenge not only the common norms and values of American life, but also the limits of queer political activism in the second half of the 20th century and in the post-Stonewall decades until today. Not only fiction and poetry, but also theater, stories of trans identities, and performance arts—art forms used as expressions of restlessness, joy, and defiance among marginalized identities within the queer community.

From a list of many insightful papers from authors who responded enthusiastically to these themes, a short selection has now become part of this special issue of *JAm It!*, and we believe that the essays in this issue comprise a representative selection of the debate that took place during the "Queering America" conference. In "Queering American History. New Perspectives and the Impact of Archival Activism," Emanuele Monaco urges us to consider the implications of "queer[ing] our common understanding of American history," as he reflects on the instruments and methods that can be adopted effectively towards such aim and the implications of such efforts. The path sketched out by Monaco is neither simple nor painless, as Anthony Castet's contribution, "Subverting Same-Sex Couples' Equal Dignity: the Perpetuation of a System of Double Binds," further testifies by exploring the disastrous effects of post-Trump era's conservative US politics on same-sex couples' rights in the name of so-called "religious freedom," through policies targeting and limiting the freedom and equality of the LGBTQ+ community.

Freedom of expression and equality enter also Daniele Atza's analysis of popular representations of non-conforming sexualities in "Let Me Get This Queer: Recognition of Age and Sexuality in *Grace and Frankie*," in which the author argues that the Netflix series provides a liberating space for the portrayal of queer and elderly sexuality, against common ageist biases and misconceptions—while not particularly radical in its form, but effective precisely because it is aimed at a general public on a mainstream platform. Reflecting on taboos regarding sexual orientation through one of the most relevant US intellectuals and writers of the second half of the twentieth century, Francesca Scaccia's contribution, "The Trope of Africanism to Address Homosexuality in *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin," explores literary representations of the intersections between queerness and blackness and their subversive implications in the context of the conservative 1950s, as well as the challenges that Baldwin's argument on Africanism posed to a notion of American identity as inherently white, male, and heterosexual. Finally, crossing geographical and temporal borders, Steph Berens's piece "(Re-)Narrating Transgender's Pasts, Presents, and Futures in Casey Plett's *Little Fish*" expands the debate to Canada, offering, through literature, a comparative perspective on US and Canadian queer politics and representations. Plett's novel of "transness," Berens argues, goes beyond and against cisnormative linear narrative canons while reworking time and narrative patterns in order to acknowledge queer and trans experience, liberating them from the temporal strictures of heteronormativity.

These essays effectively convey what we aimed to achieve with our conference. By bringing together different perspectives, identities, personal histories, research areas, and methodological sensibilities, we wanted to explore what a queer understanding of the United States can tell us about the world we live in, how it is changing, and what place we as scholars hold in this change. We recognize our responsibility to critically engage with these complexities and to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on subjects like sex, gender, and social recognition, with interdisciplinarity and intersectionality as guiding principles. As we try to demonstrate with this issue, a queer understanding of society requires effort on all fronts of academic research. We hope that the enthusiasm we shared and put into

practice through our work will also inspire our readers, inside and outside the walls of academia.

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