When I was growing up, one of my Quaker mother’s favorite expressions was “Everyone’s queer except thee and me, and sometimes I think thee is a little queer, too.” Even as a child, I loved both the sentiment and the language, and then later I got a special kick out of the possibilities of the word “queer.” But until I sat down to write this piece, I had never thought about how appropriate the saying is to a consideration of the history of sexuality. For the most striking thing about the literature is that the vast majority of what we know about sexuality in the past is about what is “queer,” in the sense of nonnormative. We assume that “normative” describes most of what happened sexually in the past, but we know very little about that. Except what the history of nonnormative sexuality—same-sex, commercial, non- or extra-marital, or in some other way deemed inappropriate—can tell us. And that, it turns out, is quite a lot.

Like motherhood or childhood, sexuality, we once assumed, had no history. Now we know better. Sexuality, consisting of, among other elements, sexual desires, sexual acts, love, sexual identities, and sexual communities, has not been fixed over time and differs from place to place. That is, whether and how people act on their desires, what kinds of acts they engage in and with whom, what kinds of meanings they attribute to those desires and acts, whether they think love can be sexual, whether they think of sexuality as having meaning for identities, whether they form communities with people with like desires—all of this is shaped by the societies in which people live. On the streets of New York at the turn of the nineteenth century, men engaged in sexual acts with other men without any bearing on their identity as heterosexual, as long as they took what they thought of as the “male part.” Women embraced their women friends, pledged their undying love, and slept with each other without necessarily interfering with their married lives. Knowing these patterns, it begins to make more sense that Jonathan Katz wrote a wonderfully titled book, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (1995), for it was only when certain acts and feelings came to be identified as the characteristics of a new type of person, “the homosexual,” that people began to think of “heterosexuals” (1). And what defined a heterosexual? Someone who did not, under any (or almost any) circumstances, engage in same-sex love or intimacy or sex. That this never became a hard and fast rule throughout U.S. society is suggested by the recent attention to life on “the down low,” the practice of some black men who secretly engage in sex with other men but live in heterosexual relationships, or to patterns of sexuality among Latino men (2). But the important point here is that normative heterosexuality—what scholars sometimes call “heteronormativity”—can only be defined in contrast to what it is not. Which is why the history of nonnormative sexuality and the concept of “queer” is so important.

So how did people come to think of themselves as homosexual or bisexual or heterosexual or transsexual? That is one of the interesting questions that historians have explored. We now know a great deal about the development of the concepts by the sexologists, scientists, and social scientists who studied sexual behavior, but we also are learning more about the complex relationship between scientific definitions (and, in the case of transsexuality, medical techniques) and the desires and identities of individuals (3). For example, Lisa Duggan, in her book *Sapphic Slashers* (2000), details the ways that publicity about a notorious lesbian murder in Memphis in the late nineteenth century both fed on and fed into such diverse genres as scientific case studies and French novels (4). In his work on New York, George Chauncey opens the curtains on an early twentieth-century world in which men were not homosexual or heterosexual, despite the categorizations of the sexologists, but instead fairies or panseys, wolves or husbands, queers or “normal” men depending on their class position, ethnicity, and sexual role (the part one plays in a sexual act—generally penetrator or encloser) (5). And Joanne Meyerowitz, in *How Sex Changed* (2002), reveals that even before the publicity about Christine Jorgensen’s sex-change surgery hit American newsstands, individual men and women wrote of their longings to change sex and
bombarded physicians with questions and demands (6). That is, we do not have the doctors and scientists to thank for our identities; their definitions sometimes enabled people to come to an understanding of their feelings and actions, sometimes to reject the definitions. But it was observation of individuals and communities that led the sexologists to their thinking about categories in the first place. We, as homosexuals and heterosexuals and bisexuals, were not created out of thin air.

Identities—and by identities I mean not just homosexual or gay or lesbian, but all their elaborate manifestations such as fairy, faggot, pogue, lamb, bulldagger, ladylover, butch, stud, fem—have a complex relationship to behavior, as the contemporary case of life on the down low makes clear. Over time, the sexologists came to define homosexuality not as gender inversion—effeminacy in men and masculinity in women—but as desire for someone of the same sex. By extension, heterosexuals felt no such desire. But how to explain men who identified as heterosexual but had (appropriately masculine-defined)—that is, insertive rather than receptive) sex with other men? Or, in the case of women who came to be known as “political lesbians” in 1970s lesbian feminist communities, women who identified as lesbians but didn’t have sex with women (7)? Identity and behavior are not always a neat fit, as the revelations of widespread same-sex sexual interactions in the famous Kinsey studies of male and female sexuality made clear to a stunned American public in the postwar decades. In response to his findings, based on interviews with individuals about their sexual behavior, Kinsey developed a scale to position individuals about their sexual behavior, Kinsey and his colleagues published Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948) and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953), which suggested that homosexuality was more common than most Americans assumed. (Photograph taken in 1953 by William Dellenback. Image reprinted by permission of The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction.)

Another aspect of the relationship of identity to behavior is suggested by some of the labels people claimed for themselves, for many of them referred to a preference for specific kinds of sexual acts, sexual roles, or sexual partners. George Chauncey’s research on the Naval investigation into “perversion” in Newport, Rhode Island, in the second decade of the twentieth century revealed the very specific terms used for those who preferred particular acts and roles (9). In his study of the Pacific Northwest, Peter Boag describes a preference for anal or interfermental intercourse in the intergenerational relationships between “wolves” and “punks” among transient laborers (10). Liz Kennedy and Madeleine Davis’s study of the working-class lesbian bar community in Buffalo, New York, in the 1940s and 1950s makes clear how central sexual roles were, at least in theory, to the making of butches and fems (11). One identity, that of “stone butch,” was defined by what a woman did not do, in this case desire and/or allow her lover to make love to her.

One of the things that historians’ uncovering of the sexual acts that took place between people of the same sex reveals is how these changed over time. Sharon Ullman’s research shows that oral sex between men was considered something new in the early twentieth century. When the police in Long Beach, California, broke up a “society of queers,” they were confounded to discover that they were having oral rather than anal sex and concluded that that didn’t really count as homosexual sex. The men themselves dubbed oral sex “the twentieth-century way” (12). Likewise, Kennedy and Davis found that butches and fems in Buffalo did not engage in oral sex. We know, or should know, that cultures in different times and places foster different kinds of sexual acts. Kissing, for example, is a relatively recent Western innovation as something erotic. But on the whole, as Heather Miller has pointed out, historians of sexuality have paid very little attention to the actual sexual acts in which people—and especially heterosexual people—engage (13). One of the things that nonnormative sexuality can tell us about heteronormativity is what kinds of sexual acts are acceptable. We know, for example, that heterosexual oral sex was something confined to prostitution—at least in theory—until the early twentieth century. What prostitutes, both male and female, were willing to do, especially for increased fees, tells us something about what “respectable” women were probably not.

In addition to interest in desire, love, sexual acts, and identities—and the complex relationships among them—historians of sexuality have concentrated on the building of communities and on struggles to make the world a better place. Martin Meeker, in his book Contacts Desired (2006), uncovers the communications networks that made same-sex sexuality visible and both resulted from and contributed to the building of communities and the homosexual movement in the post-Second World War decades (14). His concentration on a wide variety of media adds to incredibly rich research on different communities. In addition to Chauncey on New York, Kennedy and Davis on Buffalo, and Boag on Portland, there’s Esther Newton on Cherry Grove, telling the story of the creation of a gay resort (15). In the same vein, Karen Krahaluk has detailed the ways that Provincetown became “Cape Queer” (16). Marc Stein, in City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves (2006), uses the history of Philadelphia to detail, among other things, the relationship between lesbian and gay worlds in the city and in the movement (17). Nan Alamilla Boyd, in her study of San Francisco, shows not only how the city by the Bay became a gay mecca (something Meeker addresses as well from a different perspective), but also how queer culture and the homosexual movement had a more symbiotic relationship than we...
had thought (18). A collection of articles on different communities, Creating a Place for Ourselves (1997), provides even more geographical diversity, as does John Howard’s work on the vibrant networks gay men fashioned in the rural South (19).

What these studies collectively reveal is the way economic, political, and social forces, especially in the years since the Second World War, enhanced the possibilities for individuals with same-sex desires to find others like themselves, to build institutions and communities, to elaborate identities, and to organize in order to win basic rights: to gather, work, play, and live. This despite the crackdown following the war, which David Johnson argues in The Lavender Scare (2004) was more intense and long lasting than the effort to root Communists out of government (20). These works on diverse communities have also fleshed out the story John D’Emilio tells of the rise of the homophile movement in his classic Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities (1983) and responded to the question of how the war shaped the experiences of gay men and women first told by Allan Bérubé in his 1990 book Coming Out Under Fire (21).

Increasingly, research on same-sex sexuality and other forms of nonnormative sexuality has attended to the relationship of sexual desires and identities to gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Lisa Duggan’s Sapphic Slashers, for example, tells the story of white middle-class Alice Mitchell’s murder of her lover Freda Ward interwoven with the Memphis lynching that drove Ida B. Wells from her hometown and into her anti-lynching crusade. Judy Wu and Nayan Shah attend to how ethnicity shaped sexuality in the Chinese American community (22). John D’Emilio’s biography of Bayard Rustin makes his identity as a black gay man inseparable from considering his role in the civil rights movement (23). George Chauncey and Peter Boag detail different ways that class distinctions emerged in forms of same-sex sexuality on opposite sides of the continent. Karen Krahulik makes ethnicity and class central to the story of the coexistence, sometimes peaceful and sometimes not, of gay and lesbian pioneers and Portuguese fishermen in Provincetown. And Kevin Mumford, in Interzones (1997), argues for the centrality of the areas of New York and Chicago in which racial mixing and all sorts of nonnormative sexuality took place for the shaping of both mainstream and gay culture (24).

Which brings us back to the notion of the queerness of us all. We know that, without the concept of homosexuality, there would be no heterosexual intercourse (26). To take another example, in her forthcoming book, Susan Freeman explores sex education directed at girls in the 1950s and 1960s, revealing, among other things, the ways that girls pushed to learn what they needed to know (27). These contributions—examples from my own students or former students—add to what we know about heteronormativity from scholars such as Sharon Ullman, Beth Bailey, David Allyn, and Jeffrey Moran (28).

So my mother was right, except she didn’t go far enough. As Dennis Altman pointed out in arguing for the “homosexualization of America,” and as my own work with Verta Taylor on drag queens and the responses they evoke in audience members reveals, in a wide variety of ways, from what we desire to how we love to how we make love to how we play, we are all a little queer (29). And we have a lot to learn from the history of nonnormative sexualities.

Endnotes
27. Susan Kathleen Freeman, “Making Sense of Sex: Adolescent Girls and Sex Education in the United States, 1940-1960” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2002). Revised version to be published by the University of Illinois Press.

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