

# The Use of the Word “Queer” as an Identity:

A look at how The Lafayette newspaper have  
incorporated “Queer” into the everyday discourse

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(340: Sexuality Studies)

Though Lafayette is not a model for inclusiveness and diversity, Queer history is dipped into the college in complex ways: from using the word Queer as a meaning for peculiarity, to Queer becoming its own identity. The Lafayette student newspaper has recorded the events in which these identities shape and reshape behind different meanings. Before Queer became an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ identified people, or as an identity in it of itself, the word was used to describe something or someone as odd or abnormal, secluded from the world of normalcy. Questions I will keep in mind through the essay are; has the word queer really reshape itself to have a new, different significant meaning, or if today, since Queer people are othered, the old definition of queer as odd still remains today? Around the time, or before, the word “Queer” started appearing in writing, were students using it verbally?

In an article published<sup>1</sup> on March 13th, 1941 by Robert Montgomery '43, the word “Queer” was used to define a sport that seemed peculiar to the reporter who witnessed it, ultimately classifying it as “queer.” The article described the discontent of the reporter, and thus Montgomery (it is unclear if Montgomery was referring to himself in the third-person or if he was recounting the event that an individual journalist reported back to him). Montgomery wrote that he would not bother and attempt to name the sport, but that describing it would suffice. Later, he added, “...this reporter was snooping around Pax [a former name of a building on campus] on his own hook, when suddenly he saw queer antics down the hill away.” The sport was described as a “combination between swan-diving, skiing, and [tobogganing]....as each body hurtled off the cliff and made its rapid but bumpy way down toward the valley.” The word queer, in this sense, was used to define the unconventional nature of the sport, compared to the other

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<sup>1</sup> Montgomery, Robert. “Campus Indians Revive Sport On Peak of Paxinosa.” *The Lafayette*. March 13, 1941, <https://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19410313>

normalized sports on campus. Considering that the reporter was a student from the 40s, it is easy to conclude that this student may represent the majority of the campus' political atmosphere, and thus "Queer" wasn't used as an identity. In addition, though there were no descriptions of the students playing the sport, the headline for the article nonetheless regards them as "Indians." If the athletes were, in fact, people of color, Indians, or non-whites, did the fact that they might have been non-white inevitably make the sport have "queer antics"? How could that be if Lafayette did not accept black students until 1947? However, if they were indeed "Indians," did their minority status increase their "queerness"?

Around the time where students were organizing and renaming queer-based organizations, the word queer, as a noun, was used to describe a supernatural older man in an issue published on May 9th, 1997 by Kevin Doyle<sup>2</sup>, the editor-in-chief at the time. The article consisted of Doyle addressing the slow upcoming changes that were inevitable for the campus in the coming years. In the article, he describes a peculiar event where a "queer" man follows him across the Quad. This man tells Doyle that the changes he has been experiencing are nothing compared to the changes in the previous years. The man mentions the first co-ed class, the time where the administration liked Greek Life, when Saturday morning classes were discontinued.

The "queer" old man described alumni who have come back and found themselves lost in the midst of new faces and buildings, while others preferred to watch from a distance through the "rose colored binoculars of alumni" magazines and newsletters. Doyle ends the article with a quote of the man telling him to "keep in mind that radical changes are brought about by small ones when no one is looking." Giving that the article was published on May, around the time that

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<sup>2</sup> Doyle, Kevin. "Some last words of advise." *The Lafayette*. May 9, 1997, <http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19970509>

The Lafayette stops publishing for the semester, the article heavily highlighted seniors who wrote letters of farewell and students responding to a Chemistry Professor, who was leaving the college due to being mistreated poorly by the administration. Though Doyle wrote a warning at the beginning of the article, the warning is not about what the readers should expect of the article, but one that reads like satire. The “queer” old man was described as having a glowing green L letter on his sweater and an eerie smirk, which often startled Doyle. Mid-article, one concludes that the event was merely a fictional way for Doyle, as a graduating senior, to reassure students of the inevitable changes of the campus for the upcoming years.

At a point during my research, the fact that Doyle used the word queer to describe an odd man drove me to the conclusion that perhaps he used it because it has not been claimed as an overarching identity, or an identity in it of itself. However, when looking at the Lafayette College Safe Zone catalogue in 1996,<sup>3</sup> which happened a year prior to “Some last words of advice,” I had wondered if “Queer” was part of the discourse amongst students on the campus, or outside of it. The Lafayette College Safe Zone organization on campus published 68 recommendations of queer movies and Books & Publications. The name in which the movies for gay-identified people were labeled as “Queer Movie,” included: “The Color Purple,” “The Birdcage,” “Things I Never Told You,” “Boys on the Side,” and “Before Stonewall.” Though the movies recommended did not have Queer in the title, the books and publications that The Lafayette College Safe Zone published did. Those titled included: “Beyond Queer: Challenging Gay Left Orthodoxy” by Bruce Bawer, “Queer Nations: Collection of Gay and Lesbian Wit and Wisdom”

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<sup>3</sup> “Gay, Lesbians, & Bisexual Issues.” *Lafayette College Safe Zone*, Ca. 1996. Reference Files. Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

by David Blanton, “Queer and Loathing” by David B. Feinberg, “Queer Words, Queer Images & All the Ways Home & Sister and Brother” by Ringer, “Queer Spirits” by William Roscoe, “Cossell’s Queer Companion” by William Stewart, and “Queer by Choice” by Vera Whisman.

Did the titles of these books and movies bring a new label to the gay and lesbian discourse on campus? Were these books popular enough amongst both the Lafayette community as an institution, and LGBT communities within it? If, indeed, the word queer made its way into the institution, why did Doyle refer to the man, although fictional, as queer? Did he not feel compelled to call the situation by another name? Although those questions may be unanswerable without having interviewed Doyle or other student journalists that used the word beyond its current state of identity, these are nonetheless pivotal questions. Perhaps the best method as to have an idea of why this happened, we could look at what’s happening today on campus. Is the student body labeling these different identities “correctly.” And if so, are they using it in a respectful way? Again, this question is too broad to have one answer, for in a campus like Lafayette, students have differing opinions; from liberals, to conservatives, to students apathetic of issues outside of their own.

The acceptance and normalization of queer as an identity may have not been as easy to incorporate into the everyday discourse. Given the fact that gay focused groups on campus were shaping and re-shaping their brand name. The organization we know today as Quest was not always simply Quest, but one who changed their names for different reasons. The reasons were all for the sake of speaking to oneself or the Lafayette community overall. In other words, these were queer people searching for acceptance and a home in their claimed identities. To date, Quest is simply a name and not an acronym for anything beyond it. Having said that, it was

Initially named FLAG (Friends of Lesbians and Gays). But by 1994, the name changed to (Friends of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals) FLAGB<sup>4</sup>. Four years later in 1998, the group changed its name to GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance). In an article by Jessica McRorie, published on September 18, 1998<sup>5</sup>, students expressed that the name change would help embody the group's purpose to "make the group more comfortable to heterosexuals who might have been intimidated by the former title," Co-President Brian Want '00 said. "Some people misunderstood who we are and what the group does. They thought you had to be gay to be affiliated with the group," he added. The need to get the approval of the gatekeepers at Lafayette was something that GSA, as a developing organization, sought out to do. Through the lens of heterosexuality, or the cisgender performing institution, GSA thought they would find a home. As a queer organization, the default goal was to become free of oppression from an oppressive institution, but by renaming the group GSA, it did no such thing. The gatekeepers, in this case, became the higher institution who listened to the repressed, thus reinforcing its own powers. As Michel Foucault said, "The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and the most solemn rites."<sup>6</sup> When applied to Lafayette, the easiest way to give power to the repressors,

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<sup>4</sup> "Gay, Lesbians, & Bisexual Issues." *LGBTQ Dates in Lafayette College History (A Work in Process)*, May 10, 2014. Reference Files.Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

<sup>5</sup> McRorie. Jessica. "FLAGB no more GSA takes over." *The Lafayette*. September 18, 1998, <http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19980918>

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc. New York, 1978).

is to confess and wait upon their approval to become accepted into the heterosexual, cisgender world.

Trying to appeal to the heterosexual and cisgender performing Lafayette student body did not help GSA become a more widely known and respected program. We can see that in an article published on February 18, 2000 by Caitlyn Kelleher<sup>7</sup>. Students running GSA petitioned for a name change to QuEST (Questioning Established Sexual Taboos) to student government. According to Want, who by the time GSA wanted to re-identify itself to QuEST was the former president, the lack of student interest caused GSA to be inactive. The student body varied in opinions, though many preferred to remain anonymous: many felt that the campus was not involved in the discourse of gay discrimination and identities, thus making the college less homophobic, while others felt that the campus was homophobic precisely because of the lack of conversations. Kelleher, the journalist, observed that after students claimed that the reason why Lafayette didn't discuss gay issues was because it was not a normal or "typical" topic, those students ended their sentences by saying that "there was nothing wrong with homosexuality."

Along with the atmosphere of name-change, there was a feeling of sensitivity in the language used to describe students' opinions; whether positive or negative. At first glance, I thought that QuEST was an acronym that included Queer into the equation due to the fact that in previous years the organization recommended "Queer Movies" and books for people to educate and find themselves in. Once I realized that QuEST stood for Questioning Established Sexual Taboos, I questioned their decision of the name change. The general feeling was to erase gay

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<sup>7</sup> Kelleher, Caitlyn. "Gay Straight Alliance seeks to revalue gay awareness at Lafayette." *The Lafayette*. February 18, 2000, <http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/20000218>

identities in order to appeal to the gatekeepers of Lafayette, and though GSA was meant to start an allyship between straights and gays, QuEST completely erased gay identities from its title, and instead, worked the word taboo into its identity. Having said that, in that same issue, The Lafayette made their “That’s What You Think,” (their question of the week) to be: “Do you think Lafayette needs a homosexual awareness group?” Four people answered: two women (Cassidy Ludlow ‘03 and Rose Sullivan ‘00) and two men (Karl Klingmann ‘00 and Randy Copenhauer ‘02). Both the women agreed with the “homosexual awareness group” and said that the college is “too homophobic” and that “there is a lot of prejudice and ignorance towards those different sexual orientations on” the campus. Unsurprisingly, the two men either did not think the group was necessary for the campus, or thought it was “probably a good idea,” but that they wouldn’t partake in it. It is clear that the idea of silencing an entire group of students that seeked break out of that silence ran throughout Lafayette’s history: by the way in which students felt that Lafayette did not need a “homosexual group” for gay people, or students being indifferent to the change, but nevertheless socially distanced themselves from it. Not talking about a sexuality does not make it go away, but reinforces it as a established identity, even if the results is that they are othered by the larger institution.<sup>8</sup>

In 2003, three years after QuEST became the official name of the organization, they held its first “Queer Prom” for all college and universities in the Lehigh Valley Area; almost every year after the first queer prom, The Lafayette advertised the prom in its Weekly Schedule of Events section. By this time, it is an instinct to assume that the word “Queer” as an identity became accepted amongst the community in the written form. However, later that year, QuEST

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc. New York, 1978) page 59.



changed its name to no longer mean Questioning Established Sexual Taboos, but to simply be Quest (with lower cases). Though I could not find a statement written in *The Lafayette* about the name change, in a list of events related to queer history at Lafayette<sup>9</sup>, a student who was part of the board of Quest wrote, “The previous name suggests that homosexuality is a sexual taboo and that is not the message the group wants to send to the campus community or prospective students.” As of date, Lafayette’s queer space is still called Quest. No longer implying that queerness is a taboo discussion, students are now able to identify Quest as its own identity and equally attach it to LGBTQ+ issues on campus. What would the next name for Quest be if, of course, it ends up changing? Why would the name change?

Approximately the next time the word queer appeared in *The Lafayette* was in September 19, 2003, when an article on the critically acclaimed show “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” was published<sup>10</sup>. The article by Helen Duffy and Betsy Feinberg stated that “Lafayette students seem to enjoy” the show. Erica Morobito ‘06 said that the show seemed to be more popular amongst girls at the campus. Shari Leventhal said that “there’s a sense of light humor that makes it fun to watch.” What about the show made it so nationally popular? What about at Lafayette? Why, according to Morobito, was it so popular amongst women on campus, as opposed to an equal gender division. Like the article by Caitlyn Kelleher I referred to earlier in the paper, women seemed to be more content with shows and organization that dealt with queer and/or gay identities. Masculinity for men on the Lafayette campus seemed to be most at risk.

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<sup>9</sup> “Gay, Lesbians, & Bisexual Issues.” *LGBTQ Dates in Lafayette College History (A Work in Process)*, May 10, 2014. Reference Files.Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

<sup>10</sup> Dutty. Helen. Feinberg. Betsy. “‘Fab Five’ eye top of television ratings chart.” *The Lafayette*. September 19, 2003, <https://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/20030919>

When a man is associated with anything that downgrades them into femininity, their masculinity could be stripped away at any moment during a short period of time. However, when a man degrades women around other men, their status as man permits them to hold onto their privilege. Therefore, it is no surprise that although the premise of the show had to do with straight men associating themselves with queer men, straight guys at an institution like Lafayette did not “enjoy” the show. Which applies to the same opinion that the men interviewed had about queer organizations on campus. Indifference or denial of gay rights made men’s masculinity stay stronger; it is part of their gender performance. Since men held the burden of male privilege, women are more likely to freely speak out or enjoy gay content without their femininity being stripped away.

Almost a full year after the review of “Queer Eye” the word “Queer” was used in an article published in in October 24, 2008<sup>11</sup>. The news editor wrote an article on motivational speaker Daniel Bauer, who was meant to give a talk at the college on HIV/AIDS, but was hospitalized due to the “worsening of his own case of the disease.” After recovering from a the coma, Bauer told QuEST that he nonetheless plans to return to the campus by “the end of the semester.” His hospitalization stirred new conversations amongst students: they opened up for discussions and prepared cards to send Bauer to the hospital. An example of how students started to use queer as an identity in the everyday discourse is when Chris Nial ‘10 said, “people just don’t think about AIDS....people see it as an issue just within the queer community.” Perhaps it took a while for students to claim the “queer” label and use it as a broad term of LGBTQ+ people, but as of what The Lafayette recorded, that was one of the few times where a student

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<sup>11</sup> Miller. Jayne. “AIDS lecture given new depth after speaker hospitalized.” October 24, 2008, <https://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/20081024>

used “Queer” to identify a whole group. Was “Queer” previously used as a spoken identity, but needed to take time to make its way into writing, and the press?

As a current writer for The Lafayette, I try to be as inclusive as I can when it comes to discourse of inclusivity on campus. However, as I was researching for this paper, I found that I, as a queer person, still excluded the queer community in an article I wrote on February 16th, 2018 about Black History at Lafayette<sup>12</sup>. In the article, I looked at Aaron O. Hoff, who was an African American student and part of the first class of students at Lafayette. During my research, it was unclear whether Hoff was a student or if his only purpose was to blow a horn at the waking hour. I looked at the eleven black students who attended the college from 1832 to 1846 before a span of 100 years in which Lafayette did not accept applications from black students. In 1947, Lafayette allowed African-American students to apply to the college.

In addition, I looked at the magazine Rapped In Black, which black students created in 1969 to recruit more students of color, and express their concerns on racial tensions on the campus. Then, I interviewed Charles Evans '19, the current president of ABC. An interesting subject he brought up was that though Lafayette claimed to be supportive of its black students, they do not necessarily care about these students once they made their way into the institution. “But do you value acclimating students from all over, especially students of color and black students, into an environment where they are not necessarily, they were never the ideal ... [Lafayette is] welcoming me, but what else are you doing to make me want to stay and to make me want to flourish,” he said. Indeed, black students need to have a voice on campus and need to

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<sup>12</sup> Sanchez. Mario. “Black history at Lafayette is rich, but goals to achieve more diversity persevere.” The Lafayette. February 16, 2018, <https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2018/02/16/black-history-at-lafayette-is-rich-but-goals-to-achieve-more-diversity-persevere/>

be supported by the institution at large, therefore I do not believe that this article was entirely unnecessary. However, as a person who wrote about marginalized identities, I failed to mention black queer men and women of Lafayette. Though I am a gay-identified man of color at Lafayette, I told the stories of people through my eyes, thus making me the gatekeeper who did not think to incorporate black queer identities and struggles.

At my next attempt to write an inclusive, informative article, I decided to focus on the history of women at Lafayette, published May 9, 2018.<sup>13</sup> In the article, I interviewed women, both black and white, who were either part of the first co-ed class, or came shortly afterwards, but still felt like there was tension between men and women on campus. The article's primary focus seemed to be heterosexual, cisgender women, or at least many did not speak on their sexuality. There is no doubt that there were queer women on campus at that time, though they may not have known of "Queer" as an identity. Either way, I failed to incorporate those voices with queer stories. At an attempt to get those voices, I asked Director of Special Collections and College Archives Diane Shaw about transgender identified women at that time. I mistakenly attributed her quote to say that with the Oral History project, they were unable to capture transgender women's voices: "We didn't ask the right questions during the oral history interviews to elicit information, and the few occasions when we did, students told us that they didn't even talk about [gender and sexuality].... With our new LGBTQ oral history project, we are trying to capture some of those stories... We have yet to find a transgender student and I hope we

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<sup>13</sup> Sanchez, Mario. "Lafayette's journey from all-male to co-ed: the first female students' experiences." *The Lafayette*. March 9, 2018, <https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2018/03/09/womens-history-month-lafayettes-first-coed-class-changed-the-atmosphere-at-the-college/>

can.” In other words, the only time in which I used the word queer in the article, was to refer to The Queer Archives/LGBTQ Oral History Project, and not used it as an identifying label.

Upon Diane Shaw realizing my mistake, she kindly wrote a letter to the editor<sup>14</sup>, in which she praised the work that I’ve done, but pointed out that I miss-contributed her quote. She wrote, “I did want to clarify the quotes attributed to me in this article about transgender students. My comments about not identifying any transgender students were said in the context of the 2002-04 Coeducation Oral History Project, when we did not ask the kinds of questions that might have helped us learn about such students. I am delighted to report that with our current initiative—the LGBTQ Oral History Project—we have already interviewed three transgender alumni and we have members of the trans community working on the project with us.” Though my attempt to include queer voices, I did not use the word queer as an identifying factor, thus making me a gatekeeper and thus failing to use the discourse as it is used today.

Furthermore, The Lafayette published another review of “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” by Caroline Nawrocki ‘18, the Managing Editor at the time on February 23, 2018.<sup>15</sup> She summarized the show as being about five gay men who go to the home of straight men, or guys who struggle with their sexual identity, and make specific aspects of their lives better. In the show, we see explorations of coming out stories, discussions of the 2016 election, race and religion. Because the show uses the word “queer” as an identity, it reinforces the conversation of an identity that today we will most likely use as an umbrella term. Another article which reviews

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<sup>14</sup> Shaw, Diane. “Letter to the Editor.” The Lafayette. March 23, 2018,

<https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2018/03/23/letter-to-the-editor-14/>

<sup>15</sup> Nawrocki, Caroline. “Heartfelt remake of ‘Queer Eye’ embraces ‘the politically charged moments.’” *The Lafayette*. February 23, 2018,

<https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2018/02/23/remake-of-queer-eye-makes-its-way-to-netflix-strong/>

a gay-themed movie is “Love, Simon.” The article was published on April 6, 2018 by Makaela Finley.<sup>16</sup> Though the word queer was never really used in the entire movie, Finley does use the word queer as an identity when she said, “Not only are queer audiences getting a happy love story, straight audiences are getting a young-adult movie that displays the power of strong friendships and importance of being true to one’s self.” The progression in which “Queer” was used in the past and now shows through this review.

Furthermore, as of date the Lafayette administration is striving to make the campus a more inclusive space for “genderqueer” students. Approximately, the college labeled 50 bathrooms as all-gender and are currently working toward letting students put their preferred names on their student IDs and on other college documents, according to an article written in *The Lafayette* by the current editor-in-chief Kathryn Kelly.<sup>17</sup> In the article, professors, deans, and students were interviewed about the changes. In this article, the word “queer” is not used by itself, but instead “genderqueer” seems to be part of the discourse. The Libraries Instruction Coordinator Lijuan Xu, used the identity genderqueer when she said, “Once all the information is nicely in place, when there’s any form of communication, the person will be addressed in the appropriate way, especially when it comes to transgender or genderqueer.” Using the term queergender does not erase queer completely. In fact, what it does is add on to the many different

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<sup>16</sup> Finley. Makaela. “Movie Review: ‘Love, Simon’ stands out as an important and impactful comedy.” *The Lafayette*. April 6, 2018, [https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2018/04\\_06/movie-review-love-simon-stands-out-as-an-important-and-impactful-comedy/](https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2018/04_06/movie-review-love-simon-stands-out-as-an-important-and-impactful-comedy/)

<sup>17</sup> Kelly. Kathryn. “Diversity committee strives for inclusivity: Measures including increasing all-gender bathrooms and use of preferred names.” *The Lafayette*. April 27, 2018, [https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2018/04\\_27/diversity-committee-strives-for-inclusivity-all-gender-bathroom-additions-among-strides/](https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2018/04_27/diversity-committee-strives-for-inclusivity-all-gender-bathroom-additions-among-strides/)

identifying terms that we have for people with identities that have been othered, or do not ascribe to the heterosexual, cisgender institutions that we have lived in, especially Lafayette.

In conclusion, there are many more ways, I'm sure, in which the word Queer was used amongst students at Lafayette. Perhaps through the discourse of verbal language, not so much the written word. Perhaps "Queer" felt too taboo to have it as a written identity, even for reporters reporting on LGBTQ+ issues on The Lafayette.

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