Why "Queer" Newark?

The term "queer" has a complicated history, and students may have questions or strong feelings about its use in this project. The resources in this document can be used as a preamble to lessons that use Queer Newark content, or can help guide and inform conversations about the term as they arise.

From "Reviled, Reclaimed, and Respected: The History of the Word 'Queer'" by Timothy W. James, The Conversation

Recently, a number of people have questioned or critiqued the use of the word "queer" to describe LGBTIQA+ folk. One writer to the Guardian claimed that the "q-word" was as derogatory and offensive as the "n-word", and should not be used.

While there is a clear history of the word being used in aggressive and insulting ways, the meaning(s) and uses of queer have never been singular, simple or stable.

The origin of the word 'queer'

Queer is a word of uncertain origin that had entered the English language by the early 16th century, when it was primarily used to mean strange, odd, peculiar or eccentric. By the late 19th century it was being used colloquially to refer to same-sex attracted men. While this usage was frequently derogatory, queer was simultaneously used in neutral and affirming ways.

The examples provided in the Oxford English Dictionary show this semantic range, including instances of homosexual men using queer as a positive self-description at the same time as it was being used in the most insulting terms.

Compare the neutral :"Fourteen young men were invited […] with the premise that they would have the opportunity of meeting some of the prominent 'queers'" (1914); the insulting: "fairies, pansies, and queers conducted […] lewd practices" (1936); and self-affirmed uses: "young men who call themselves 'queers'" (1952).

John Sholto Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensberry (20 July 1844 – 31 January 1900), was a British nobleman, remembered for his role in the downfall of the Irish author and playwright Oscar Wilde, and is often cited as an early user of queer as a slur against same-sex attracted men.

In the 1960s and 1970s, as sexual and gender minorities fought for civil rights and promoted new ways of being in society, we also sought new names for ourselves. Gay liberationists began to reclaim queer from its earlier hurtful usages, chanting "out of the closets, into the streets" and singing "we're here because we're queer".

Their newsletters from the time reveal sustained questioning of the words, labels and politics of naming that lesbian and gay people could and should use about themselves. Some gay libbers even wanted to cancel the word homosexual because they felt it limited their potential and "prescribes a whole system of behaviour […] which has nothing to do with my day-to-day living".

In Australia, camp was briefly the most common label that lesbian women and gay men used to describe themselves, before gay became more prominent, used at that time by both homosexual men and women.

The evolving use of the word queer

In the early 1990s, gay had come to be used more typically to refer to gay men. Respectful and inclusive standards of language evolved to "lesbian and gay", and then "LGBT", as bisexuals and transgender people sought greater recognition.

Queer began to be used in a different way again: not as a synonym for gay, but as a critical and political identity that challenged normative ideas about sexuality and gender.
Queer theory drew on social constructionism – the theory that people develop knowledge of the world in a social context – to critique the idea any sexuality or gender identity was normal or natural. This showed how particular norms of sexuality and gender were historically contingent. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Michael Warner, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick and Lauren Berlant were enormously influential in the development of this new idea of queer. Some people began to identify as queer in the critical sense, not as a synonym for a stable gender or sexual identity, but to indicate a non-conforming gender or sexual identity.
Activists in groups such as Queer Nation also used queer in this critical sense as part of their more assertive, anti-assimilationist political actions.
Queer as an umbrella term
From the early 2000s, it became more common to use queer as an umbrella term that was inclusive of the spectrum of sexual and gender identities represented in the LGBTIQA+ acronym. Today, queer is included among the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex, asexual, brotherboy and sistergirl, recognised in style guides as the most respectful and inclusive way to refer to people with diverse sexualities and genders.
Of course, the different usages and meaning of words such as queer have often overlapped and have been hotly contested. Historical usages and associations persist and can sit uncomfortably next to contemporary reclamations.
Queer as a slur?
Contemporary concerns with queer's historical use as a slur seem odd to me. The heritage report A History of LGBTIQ+ Victoria in 100 Places and Objects (which I co-authored), surveys the complexity of language use in historical and contemporary society.
It is notable that almost all of the words that LGBTIQA+ people use to describe ourselves today have been reclaimed from homophobic or transphobic origins.
In fact, it could be said that liberating words from non-affirming religious, clinical or colloquial contexts and giving them our own meanings is one of the defining characteristics of LGBTIQA+ history.
While queer does have a history of being used as an insult, that has never been its sole meaning. Same-sex attracted and gender diverse folks have taken the word and have been ascribing it with better meanings for at least the past 50 years.
Queer's predominant use today is as an affirming term that is inclusive of all people in the rainbow acronym.
At a time when trans and gender diverse folk are facing particularly harsh attacks, I'm all for efforts to promote inclusion and solidarity. Respectful language use doesn't require us to cancel queer, but rather to be mindful of its history and how that history is experienced by our readers and listeners.

From "About – Our History," Queer Newark Oral History Project
The Queer Newark Oral History Project (QNOHP) was founded in the summer of 2011 by Darnell Moore, an activist and writer and the first chair of the City of Newark's Advisory Commission on LGBTQ Concerns, Beryl Satter, a history professor at Rutgers University-Newark, and Christina Strasburger, the administrator of the Departments of History and African American and African Studies at Rutgers University-Newark. Bringing together Newark's LGBTQ activists, high school students, artists, church leaders, professors,

administrators and university staff, Moore and Satter convened a series of focused discussions with the goal of developing an initiative to collect and preserve the history of LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming communities in Newark. The term "queer" was chosen for the name of the project to showcase the resilience of an often-invisible population of Newarkers whose lives reflected sexual and gender diversity, whether or not they adopted LGBTQ identities.

From the QNOHP

Alicia Heath-Toby
Alicia Heath-Toby: My coming out was cutting all my hair and, you know, claiming that I'm queer.
Naomi Extra: Was that the term that you used?
Alicia Heath-Toby: Yes.
Naomi Extra: Okay.
Alicia Heath-Toby: Yes. Lesbian wasn't—I had heard the word lesbian, but it sounded—I heard it in the context of it was something bad…so queer was seen to be safe. And because I was exposed to white kids early, like, that—that was the language that I heard in that community, so I adopted that word initially…queer was neutral at that time. It was an ambiguous language, at least in our community, in the African American and Latin community. It didn't raise flags. Using that language made it safe for me, if you will, to be who I was developing into as a lesbian. That really was it.

William Courson
I said we really should have an LGBT organization here in Montclair. We put the word out. It was an organizing meeting and at the time, there was something of a controversy around the name. I wanted to call it Queer Montclair. Some of the older members of the group object to the use of the word. It was a pejorative. We settled on Out In Essex, and that existed for a few years.

Marina Carreira
For a while I thought—I was like, "Oh, so I'm bisexual", and I claimed bisexual because at that point I hadn't really understood this idea of gender in the way that I understand it now, as performative, as a social construct. I mean more than 10 years, nope, even 10 years ago, non-binary to me was really weird. Like, what does that mean? Where do you exist then? And it's not that I didn't have those thoughts or those ideas about gender. I knew gender was performance. I knew that there were people who were trans. I just didn't understand it in terms of identifying myself sexually until I think I heard queer for the first time. I did my BA in English and my minor in Womens' Studies at Montclair State and I had phenomenal instructors. I took a course called The Sexual Outlaw in Literature. We read Kate Bornstein and just all these queer writers, Leslie Feinberg, and they use the term queer to just not only identify themselves sexually but sort of even in terms of gender that they were gender queer, or they were non-binary, they were trans or whatever. So, once I started understanding the complexities about queerness and LGBTQ, I guess life and culture ,was when I was like, "Oh, bisexuality means that there's this binary that I believe and I don't," so then queer became this term that felt very normal to me. Even though now, if I had– and there's people that are like, "Well isn't that a bad word?" Especially to cis-het people, they're like, "Well, isn't that a bad word, and really who do you prefer more, or where do you see yourself now in the spectrum." If I have to clarify it for people

who really can't grapple with this understanding of queer, I would say, "I'm lesbian," or, "I'm a gay woman." But, I think queer is the label that fits me most perfectly.

Elizabeth Kaeton
Elizabeth Kaeton: I love that about being queer. For me, it's queer—the word queer is interchangeable with being unique, and I love that. I'm not a cookie-cutter person.
Esperanza Santos: Nope. You create your own cookie cutter.
Elizabeth Kaeton: None of us are cookie-cutter people. We are unique and individual, and that's the wonderful thing about life. Being queer has made me appreciate and value my uniqueness, and I'm so grateful for that gift.

Larry Lyons
Lorna Ebner: How would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?
Larry Lyons: Loud. No. I identify as queer, because my sexuality has its own politics, and it's not the politics of the mainstream gay community.

Juliana Moraes
At that time, we didn't use queer, 'cause it was derogatory. Now, the community has taken it back, and it's a very empowering word, queer. I love it.

Kiyan Williams
My freshman year in college, I remember this was the conversation that came with me every class. A lot of me and my teachers often talked about what's the need to define or describe oneself as queer? Because queer had really within academia had now become a discipline, queer studies was a canonized field—legitimized field of study within the university system. There was scholarship and knowledge being forged around that identity. A lot of my teachers who were now queer had grew up or came of age as either lesbian or gay and that the language that they use to describe themselves. Then, of course, language evolve, gender and—I guess gender and sexuality became more expansive. There was also—I feel to say that it felt very important when I was in college to identify as queer both as politics as a way to affirm my difference. Because queer was—didn't feel as limiting, gay never fit me 'cause it didn't—it cuts away my sense and my gender identity. Anyway, I say all that to say that it felt really important to name myself when I was in college.

Peter Savastano
Tim Stewart-Winter: During this period…did you think of yourself as gay?
Peter Savastano: So there were other boys that I went to school with who I knew were like me, whatever that means. I don't think I had…I mean, I did have words for it, but they weren't "gay." It was usually the words I was called, which was "fairy Mary," "sissy," "queer."