

I had a defining moment on the toilet while looking at a library copy of *Lesbian Words: State of the Art*, an anthology of essays from 1995. I wanted to rip off the cover's LGBT sticker with the gusto of a rebellious streak. I then reasoned such a gesture would tear through a face in the grid of author photos that adorned the book's cover. I stared longer and felt the word "lesbian" in the title transform into an heirloom kept on the mantle of an electronic fireplace, the flames below glowing with the word "queer."

In 2010, I began collecting the phrase "queer art" in all its sweaty megaphone pronouncements. I felt pricked by "queer art," which I heard being uttered all around me in the titles of group shows, dance parties, anthologies, mission statements, press releases. I had to get close to this description, like I get close to frames in museums, breathe on their glass and notice the dust. I wanted to get so close my vision would blur. I was also collecting palpable silences around events that could have used the word "queer" as a descriptor, but didn't. Before this obsession began, I had never taken a class on "queer literature" or "queer art (history)" or "women and gender studies." When I saw academic books that used "queer" in their titles, the word seemed either empty or as unruly as a question mark. I was proud of my roving autodidacticism, but all of a sudden I had to rush.

Where else to theorize but the dance floor? I felt high from the temporary sense of majority on Pride weekend in 2011, amidst the routine marches, parades, and puking. I paid the door fee for Los Homos, a mega-party featuring Bay Area queer DJs that Amber helped organize. Celebrating Pride was new to me still and I participated

vigilantly. I offered to buy someone a drink after they told me about their doula training, but they promptly signaled to their date nearby. My notebook became my companion. I scribbled in the large font I use when writing under low light. About how this queer party was not at a queer-owned bar; about how offensive rainbow merchandise sold out of shopping carts can be.

Meanwhile, I danced close to someone dressed in saran wrap with a rainbow painted on their chin like blood drool. Attached to their shaved head were Mardi Gras beads. A haphazard toupee of bird shit. I imagined they had acquired the beads in an underhand lob from a corporate bank's float during the parade. Or they had walked off a lo-fi vampire short film shoot. I wanted the huge letters scrawled in eyeliner on their arms and back to say something profound. I paused to see the letters in staccato lines come into focus; they built the word "beautiful." I felt utterly disappointed. I was into the outfit, but not its caption. Then I saw a duo in black denim shorts and blue denim vests with pins. Their uniform matched my idea of the early 90s, except the rallying cry *Silence=Death* was missing from their pink triangle T-shirts. I danced in a sort of despair and thought about how history gets costumed. How toiling over language feels like transcribing sky-writing made of dotted lines.

The term "queer art" is both persisting and failing at a rapid pace, and for multiple reasons. Different versions of queer float up in this book, and more specific identifiers come into sharper focus. I am piecing together scraps, including the pact of the word queer, to resist the task of definition altogether.

With “queer” as shorthand for the expanding LGBTQITSGNC acronym, wordplay hums in the background. Homoground is a weekly radio podcast in Portland.<sup>3</sup> Homobiles is a donation based car service in San Francisco.<sup>4</sup> The Lesbian Lexicon Project takes queer slang words, sets them into a dictionary printed on 8.5 x 11 paper folded four times and bound by one staple.<sup>5</sup> The goal of this road trip game is to riff off word combinations for contagious neologisms. “Queer,” in relation to art, constantly reinvents itself. Loosely aligned with a range of identity positions counter to mass culture, “queer” resembles an umbrella one buys that falls apart shortly after a rainstorm. Anything can be interpreted and argued for as “queer.”

In fall of 2011, I saw Laurie Weeks perform at San Francisco’s RADAR Reading Series that explicitly labels and promotes itself as queer. RADAR also funds a writers retreat and chapbook contest with its non-profit arm muscles. After hearing Weeks’s crush-on-straight-best-friend plot line, I hurried to buy her first novel, *Zipper Mouth*. I am hungry for books by dykes, books about dykes.<sup>6</sup> Weeks’s writing is unmistakably urgent—the narrative spins and dives with interruptions of letters to her friends and Sylvia Plath. I read her book like I would devour a sandwich on the subway, always hungry to escape the straight world around me. The empathy I felt for Weeks’s narrator kept me hooked on a challenge: don’t expect her to prevail past unfulfilled longings. Reading the crush-on-best-friend plot line felt like an old band-aid dangling half on, half off a gash on my hand. As if I could banish my own best friend crushes of yore. As if the

reader, in an audience of one, could lift the narrator out of her heartbreak.

But I couldn't just think about the writing in *Zipper Mouth*. I became obsessed with the Feminist Press's choice to place a blurb by Michelle Tea on the back cover and a blurb by Eileen Myles on the front. The blurbs focus on how wide Weeks's expressions of desire manifest in the formal storm of the prose. Myles: "Laurie Weeks's *Zipper Mouth* is a short tome of infinitesimal reach, a tiny star to light the land." Tea: "*Zipper Mouth* is a brilliant rabbit hole of pitch-black hilarity, undead obsession, the horror of the everyday, and drugs drugs drugs."<sup>7</sup> The blurbs themselves don't mention queer or lesbian content outright; instead, these blurb writers' names function as codes. It's possible the Feminist Press used the blurbs because Myles and Tea are friends and contemporaries of Weeks. It's possible the Feminist Press used Myles's and Tea's blurbs as a form of queer marketing. I then admit to myself, I am that market.

So began a period of feeling inundated with the text that lines book covers. On the back of *The Wild Creatures: Collected Stories of Sam D'Allesandro*, I found the category Gay Fiction in the upper-right corner. And then Alvin Orloff's blurb: "This is what queer literature looks like freed from pretension and banality."<sup>8</sup> Suspect Thoughts Press chose to excerpt this sentence to stand alone on the back cover. Orloff's paragraph-long description of the collection is included in the book's interior.<sup>9</sup> I don't know which writers Orloff would malign with "pretension" and "banality," inviting unlimited preconceptions to lurk around the book's outermost edges. There is always good writing and bad writing and then writing that speaks to

you and writing that doesn't. Why is Orloff tempted to let "queerness" get tied up in run-of-the-mill disappointment with the "banal" and "pretentious"? Publicity often reduces its subject to a cringe-inducing cliché. "Queer literature" is clearly not exempt from any sales pitch, yet should this be more or less shocking?

Orloff leaks his disdain for the sappy coming out story. Literature with content that rides the line of "queer" is not inherently shameful to Orloff. He is just being provocative about expanding this supposedly tiny space of "queer literature." But "queer literature" has never been a tiny space. Orloff aims to distinguish D'Allesandro from the cheerleader-type support that sometimes attaches itself to *any* writing that calls itself "queer." In D'Allesandro's bio, the publisher states the brevity of his life, which ended at age thirty-one, when he died of AIDS. Context is to inextricable as blurb is to subjective. Orloff's "queer" signals the language shift heralded by those who adamantly distanced themselves from the word "gay" in the early 90s.

In her 1990 essay, "To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, Escritora y Chicana: Queer Labels and Debates," Gloria Anzaldúa writes "the term lesbian es un problema" because it operates from a white-middle-class norm.<sup>10</sup> Anzaldúa rejects "lesbian" from her multiple perspectives as "a working-class Chicana, mestizo—a composite being, amalgam de culturas y de lenguas—a woman who loves women." While Anzaldúa argues that there are no "lesbian writers," she contends there are specific points of entry, specific moments that make sense as "lesbian perspectives, sensibilities, experiences and topics."<sup>11</sup> Anzaldúa greatly influenced the academic and non-academic use of "queer,"