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Looking for Alternative Sexual Desire Across History: Connectivity as the Ontological Basis of Sexual Orientation

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Miranda Fricker’s “hermeneutical marginalization” and Martin Meeker’s “sexual communication network,” this article retraces how the adoption and therefore the existence of queer identities are predicated on the availability of alternative models of understanding sexuality. “Loci of increased human connection,” such as cities, media, and the Internet, are recognized as disseminators of hermeneutical resources and catalysts for “sexual communication networks.” By following this throughline, this article provides a framework for the social ontology of sexual orientation that is intended to be usable across history. The author renegotiates the debate about the applicability of sexual orientation lingo to queer pre-modern history by iterating on William Wilkerson’s emerging fusion theory of sexual identity. Sexual orientation is a self-interpretation of desires, which emerge, or remain hermeneutically marginalized, under the available social models that are specific to each society (and time). Historiography, in this way, can realistically enquire about sexual preference in its search for “gay history”; particular focus must be put, however, on “loci of increased human connection,” because they are the most likely sites where hermeneutically underserved desires might emerge explicitly as alternative social categories. These alternative categories might have lived only in limited contexts before the invention of modern communication technologies.

KEYWORDS

Social ontology; gay; history; homosexuality; hermeneutical injustice; sexual communication networks; loci of increased human connection

A recent history of hermeneutical de-marginalization

In her essay “Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing” (2007), philosopher Miranda Fricker explains the concept of hermeneutical injustice by mentioning the story of a queer man struggling to make sense of his erotic desires before he came across and accepted for himself the words and concepts of gayness. In the context described by Fricker, “homosexuality” was not a readily available conceptual resource this person could have used to identify his sexual drives. Living as a gay person in an environment where gayness is

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absent from the shared “pool of knowledge,” argues Fricker, means experiencing a kind of ineffable erotic otherness, with no understanding that other people also might be sharing that feeling and with little possibility of pursuing a community of “others like me.”

Embracing Fricker’s example, one might say that the existence of a social group of “gay people,” and even of all “LGBT+¹ people,” depends on individuals being able to receive relevant information and lingo to recognize themselves as “gay.” In many contexts, the idea that some men could not be attracted to what a “man” should be attracted to, and even that they had a different “sexual orientation,” is something that needs to come from outside.

It appears that currently, at least in Western societies, this “outside” is often represented by the Internet.² Queer youth, the most studied among them being young gay males, commonly use the Internet as a hermeneutical resource: by interacting with online erotic content and by coming across queer vocabulary and concepts, they are able to develop their identity as queer (Harper et al., 2009, 2016; Russell, 2002). Ample, already, is the literature focusing on how the Internet allows queer individuals to seek out and easily find information, relevant vocabulary, community, and representation (Ashford, 2006; Bond et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2021; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012; Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Johnson, 2020; M; Kya & Bargh, 1998). We could say that “the Internet,” by multiplying how a person can come across information, supports the self-identification of many contemporary queer individuals, and therefore underpins the visible existence of a large amount of today’s LGBT+ community.

Historian Martin Meeker (2006) took a similar approach when describing the impact of pre-digital media, such as novels, physical newsletters, and paper mass magazines, on the lesbian and gay community in the United States. Theorizing on this phenomenon, he understands the recent history of queer people as the extension of what he refers to as “sexual communication networks”: gay and lesbian media, in his reconstruction, become the avenues through which previously isolated queers come to understand that “there are others like me,” and therefore the necessary condition for the formation and expansion of gay and lesbian identities³ across recent history.

E[even] more than coming out (the moment of revealing one’s sexuality to one’s friends, family and the world at large), connecting (the moment of emerging from the isolation and invisibility which most who would later identify as gay or lesbian are born) is the point at which someone becomes homosexual—or, rather, gay male or lesbian. (Meeker, 2006, p. 6)

Scholar Larry Gross (2007) explicitly suggested seeing “the internet” and previous media in continuity with each other, framing online media and

digital structures as a new iteration of Meeker's "sexual communication networks."

Both authors cited, by referencing Harry Hays's biography (Timmons, 1990), the same dynamic of an isolated gay person finally able to link up with a community of peers.

Matt told Harry that they were members of a "silent brotherhood" that reached round the world. "Someday," he explained, "you will have wandered to a strange and faraway place. You'll not know who any of the people are there, or whether they mean you good or ill; you'll not hear a single word or a sound you can recognize. And then suddenly, in that frightening and alien place, you'll look across the square and you'll see a pair of eyes open and glow at you. You'll look back at him, and, at that moment, in the lock of two pairs of eyes, you are home and you are safe!" They slept in a lifeboat on board the steamer that night, and Matt gave Harry more tips about how to take care of himself in the world that lay beyond family and school. These ideas—that there was a culture of "people like us" in many cities of the world and that they shared signals by which to recognize each other—inspired Harry almost as vividly as the erotic memory of Matt. (Timmons, 1990, p. 36)

What is interesting about this example is that it does not involve a form of "media," per se, but an in-person exchange. "Sexual communication network" is, in fact, a concept that is easily applicable to how, today and across recent history, many people found and connected to a shared gay identity: by meeting strangers in person. And, in recent history, one meets new people primarily where there are many: large cities. If, in fact, one cannot be gay by themselves, cities provide large quantities of "others like me" to be gay with.

The larger the modern city the greater the range of information dispersed particularly in the capitalist West. A Toronto gay teenager in 2001 who sees the flyer for the annual sale of gay pornographic videos distributed with the free newspaper Xtra! which can be picked up at distribution boxes throughout the city will understand the existence of a range of sexualities and behaviours not all of which he imagined before he started to read. (Higgs, 2007, p. 29)

The urban context as a space supporting the existence of homosexual networks dates back at least to the roaring twenties (Higgs, 2007), and there are multiple academic accounts on cities being places particularly conducive to, specifically, gay male socialization (Aldrich, 2013; Collins, 2013; De Leo, 2021; Rey et al., 1988). The sheer number of inhabitants and the intricacies of urban contexts provide for deviants the "critical mass" of people needed for "finding each other," the hidden "cruising" spaces to build undercover sexual networks, the anonymity for leading double lives and creating clandestine communities (Bech, 1997). It can be said that urban centers, as spaces of increased human connection, can also be seen as structures favoring the circulation of a "gay culture" and the concepts and words needed for the self-understanding of sexually deviant men.

In this article, I propose the idea that, in searching for gay⁴ history, one should look for contexts of increased density of human connection, where “sexual communication networks” are likely to develop and spread: densely populated cities, paper newsletters, mass magazines, television, and the World Wide Web.

Understanding gay⁵ history by exploring the people receiving the concepts and labels (the “hermeneutical resources”) of gayness and the technological and social avenues favoring the dissemination thereof, however, is somewhat lacking. Is gay history just the history of the spread of the word “gay”? Doesn’t this perspective forbid us from inquiring about gayness and queerness in times and cultural contexts where, as Foucault would put it (2020 [1974]), Western modernity did not produce the category of homosexuality? It seems odd that urban centers started providing options for community and recognition to “sexual undesirables” only after psychiatric institutions came up with the idea of homosexuality. There are many examples in historiography where underground communities of sexual deviants gathering in the hidden nooks offered by cities are considered for the title of “pre-modern homosexuality,”⁶ but to what extent can their experience be read in continuity with how “modern” gays connect with their community and identity today? The brief historical reconstruction I suggested here, in fact, seems to rely on the idea that homosexuals become empowered to embrace their identity when they receive the adequate “hermeneutical resources,” that is the notion that other people experience the same feeling of “homosexuality” and that such a feeling is not shared by other people, the heterosexuals, who are therefore “different” from homosexuals in their sexual drives. This seems inapplicable in societies missing the concept that people have “sexual orientations” that can differ. If, however, we avoid thinking that hermeneutically marginalized people are inherently “homosexuals” who need to find liberation by coming across the concept of “homosexuality,” and we take a more nuanced view of what happens during gay identity formation, we might be able to see “sexual communication networks” in pre-modern societies in continuity with “sexual communication networks” in modern European societies.

My most radical contribution, here, tackles the issue of the social ontology of sexuality once again, and suggests a usable theoretical framework to locate the site of gay (and, more generally, LGBT+) history. I suggest the scholar should avoid looking for an essential “inner experience” of “homosexuality,” and they should avoid stopping at the mere genealogy of sexual identity categories; instead, their search should center on what I call “loci of increased human connection.”

To argue for this, I first analyze some examples of how different scholars have described sexual variance in antiquity, explaining how they differ in arguing for applying, or abstaining from applying, the category of “homosexuality” to pre-modern historical contexts. I will provide a solution by

merging William Wilkerson's (2007) theory of sexual identity with Fricker's (2007) hermeneutical injustice framework. The resulting theorization views "homosexuality" not as one specific desire or "sexual orientation" being finally verbalized, but as an alternative sexual conceptualization, offering to make sense of many different desires and experiences that, in Western modernity, fell outside the scope of the standard sexual models assigned to people. I will then apply this framework to instances, in antiquity, that have been often touted as "homosexual," proving its applicability to the understanding of sexual identities outside the confines of European modernity. Different societies provide different common sexual models to their members, and therefore leave different kinds of erotic experiences and desires in search of alternative sexual models. I argue that, in most societies, these alternative models are most likely to spread and emerge in contexts of increased density of human connection. The historian looking to locate gay history should consider, in a given society, the range of possible desires that can be satisfied under the common sexual models of that society, and should then center the loci of increased human connection as likely to foster conceptual and practical space for the satisfaction of desires that remain "hermeneutically underserved."

Foucault and the problem of historical continuity

M. Foucault's (2020 [1976]) argument about homosexuality being a social categorization particular to Western modernity has been influential in shaping academia's understanding of what it means to do history with regard to queerness.

Under many interpretations of Foucault's work, before the inception of homosexuality as a concept, same sex eroticism was thought of, in Europe, mainly as a kind of "action" (a kind of "sin") and did not constitute a kind of "person" or an attraction; as a consequence, it is impossible to conceive of homosexuality before the late 1800s and outside the European context.

Historian David Halperin (2000, 2007), while still basing his work on Foucauldian ideas, contradicts this simplified understanding, providing a more articulate iteration of Foucault. Halperin notes that the author of *History of Sexuality* was mainly interested in commenting on institutional strategies for controlling sexuality. While pre-modern sexual prohibitions worked by forbidding certain behaviors, making prescriptions and recommendations, modern institutions "discover" perversions and identify them in specific social groups, therefore instilling among people deeper and more subtle forms of control. Foucault's view, argues Halperin, is not to be understood as an exhaustive social history of homosexuality (Halperin, 2007), but more as the incipit of his theoretical discourse on modernity as a whole. The fact that modern institutions articulated sexuality in such a way as to form the concept of the "homosexual," which was later adopted by the gay liberation

movements, does not mean that before modernity there was no concept of sexual desire and no identified sexual group. In fact, Halperin does address the issue that limiting our study to the construction and circulation of sexual concepts might make us blind to gay history before European modernity. Doing the history of homosexuality, according to Halperin, does not necessarily mean limiting oneself to the label “homosexual” and its use, but should be extended to the deep analysis of the coexisting gender and sexual models of a society and how their interaction produced, at specific point in time, different social groups, such as homosexual themselves in modern Europe (Halperin, 2007).

Still, this, as we might call it, “constructionist” (Halwani, 1998) approach has been criticized by some historians.⁷ Among perspectives that favor seeing “old homosexuals” in continuity with “modern homosexuals,” Giovanni Dall’orto (2015) argued that many times, across history, homosexuals conceived of their sexual desires as peculiar and characteristic. In arguing in favor of this, Dall’Orto’s (2015) used (among others) the examples of Italian medieval sodomites and ancient Roman *cinaedi*:⁸ underground networks of men who understood themselves to be sexually attracted to men, not merely practitioners of episodic sodomy, long before the institutions of modernity shaped European sexual models in the development of homosexuality as a psychiatric category.

If we are to read Dall’Orto’s and Halperin’s contributions under the light of the idea of “sexual communication networks,” we might understand Dall’Orto’s idea as particularly contiguous to Meeker’s and to how I retraced the recent history of homosexuality by focusing on how loci of increased human connection fostered gay subjectification. Many of Dall’Orto’s (2015) examples, in fact, are about clandestine networks of sexual outlaws who, in different ages and different contexts, would “find each other” and gather in densely populated urban contexts. At first glance, Halperin’s (2000, 2007) encouragement of focusing on societal norms and shifting gender relations seems like it would fail to spot these niches, where new sexual models and practices would have happened in extremely limited instances, in defiance of norms and hidden from institutional moral enforcers. It would be incorrect, however, to state that Foucault’s theory of homosexuality prevents us from studying sexual history in a more granular way. To better understand and solve the issue, a good site of disagreement to study, about historical homosexuality, is one of these “urban niches”: the *cinaedus*.

Cinaedus and homosexual

The *cinaedus*, in Dall’Orto’s (2015) work, is described as a heavily stigmatized social identity that is, often violently or derisively, affixed to certain “lesser” men based on their supposed innate or hard-wired perverted desire. Under

this lens, while the social category of “*cinaedus*” does not completely overlap with our expectations about homosexuality, it is clear not only that ancient people recognized sexuality outside of mere approved and forbidden acts, but also that they understood some people to have same-sex erotic desires that defined them as a kind of person, in the sense that not all people had such desires. Dall’Orto’s (2015) fundamental argument is that the historian should be able, given the available data, to describe the *cinaedus* as someone *who likes it*: a homosexual.

Interestingly, Halperin (2007) also believes that the *cinaedus* of ancient cities was a “kind of person” and not merely an aficionado of specific forbidden sexual acts. Citing Williams (2010), however, Halperin described the social identity of a *cinaedus* as more akin to gender variance than sexual desire: the *cinaedus* is more “transgender” than “homosexual,” it represents a scare-image of what any men should not be, as its crimes of sexual passivity, prostitution, or same-sex activity are not necessary for categorizing as *cinaedus* any man who would not fulfill correctly the standard of manliness (Halperin, 2007).

Halperin’s argument, when referred to attempts at defining the *cinaedus* as “homosexual,” is that same-sex desire is not particularly distinctive of this kind of identity: while the modern homosexual is, succinctly, “a man who is attracted to other men,” this kind of attraction was not considered abnormal for ancient Romans (and Greeks), and the depravity of *cinaedi* consisted in their gender betrayal, their sexual submission to “real men” and their lack of erotic moderation.⁹ Halperin sees “homosexuality” as identifying the “sexual orientation” of somebody: a modern conceptualization of an individual characteristic that is qualitatively different (for instance, “homosexual,” “bisexual,” or “heterosexual”) in each person. From this perspective, the *cinaedus* is not to be thought of as homosexual because, since the Romans did not conceptualize sexual orientation and did not sort individuals according to it, *cinaedi* could have included people with largely varied sexual preferences.

One of the most recognized limits of arguing for the “homosexuality” of people who do not (or did not) declare themselves to be such, is that the claim that “homosexuals” share “the same sexual preference” not only among themselves but also across history is unfounded: “same sex attraction,” in fact, does not identify a coherent and verifiable inner experience among all gay men or women (Broido, 2000; Stein, 1990; Wilkerson, 2009). This objection to seeing *cinaedi* as possible homosexuals, however, seems unfair, as even when we deem a fellow contemporary to be homosexual, we have no direct access to their inner world. At the same time, however, the grounding needed to do so across millennia seems unstable, to say the least. In this article, I don’t aim at providing new historical research about what kind of people really were the *cinaedi*. This task is best left to historians. The reason why I decided to write about this issue is that I find it a good site of inquiry about the difficulties

of locating the history of homosexuality. I consider Dall’Orto’s (2015) argument to be interesting not because I believe it “proves” the *cinaedus* to be homosexual: I do not have the resources and tools to verify that. I consider it interesting because it posits that the *cinaedi* banded together under the recognition that they were in some way similar: just like I described contemporary gays to have emerged as groups of people coming across “others like me.”

Homosexuality as interpretation

A crucial detail in Dall’Orto’s (2015) understanding of the *cinaedus* is that, even if other “kinds of men” experienced and practiced homosexuality, *cineadi* were the ones who, in their own way, understood themselves to be homosexual. This “understanding,” more than this “homosexuality,” is the basis on which I want to elaborate my proposal for LGBT+ historical enquiry.

In the first section of this article, I decided to trace the history of homosexuality by focusing on “sexual communication networks” made possible by cities, paper media, and the Internet, which I see under the same concept of loci of increased human connection. I argue that this reconstruction does not hinge on looking for an identifiable shared feeling of “same-sex attraction,” nor does it hinge on studying the genealogy of the specific label and social category of “homosexual.” The crucial dynamic that makes it possible to understand this history as the development of sexual communication networks is the moment where a person decides to embrace a certain way of self-understanding, because they feel like they harbor desires or experience feelings that are unfit to be thought of as “heterosexual” or “normal.” This is in line with what many psychological accounts of queer self-identification processes say about the fact that, in the life journey of most LGBT+ people, there is a phase where one recognizes the incongruency between one’s inner world and the social identity they are called to fulfill in a heteronormative world (Cass, 1979, 1984; Secord & Backman, 1964; Troiden, 1989, 1998).

Philosopher William Wilkerson, in line with Fricker’s focus on hermeneutics of self, posits that sexual orientation is to be understood as interpretation, or a way of self-understanding (Wilkerson, 2007, 2009). Prior to being framed within the socially constructed concepts around sexuality offered by society (a “label,” for instance), desires are non-verbalized and unavailable to rational scrutiny. Homosexuality is a culturally contingent category that organizes the murky fabric of individual erotic experience into a conceptualization that not only gives a name to unnamed feelings but also makes them emerge as a coherent entity and, often, encourages additional erotic desires and behaviors in line with such a conceptualization (Wilkerson, 2007, 2009).¹⁰ Wilkerson’s perspective overcomes the epistemic doubts of essentialism¹¹ because it recognizes that, before emerging under the available categories of

one's society, desires are undetermined, and that therefore one should not look for clear same-sex desires to constitute homosexuality across history. As he put it: "We cannot ground claims about the sameness of desire across historical periods or cultural differences, because we do not have access to this ahistorical desire" (Wilkerson, 2007, p. 151).

Combining this understanding of sexuality with Fricker's considerations on hermeneutical injustice, we can infer that, at least in some cases, pre-verbal desires¹² are often in such a need of conceptualization that the act itself can be a form of liberation. By understanding their desires as "homosexuality," they not only lessen the anxiety of erotic ambiguity, but also justify the feelings of inadequacy due to their perceived "difference" and position themselves in a community with "others like me." There is, in short, a push, a potential for the adoption of alternative social categories, for all hermeneutically underserved desires.

At first glance, Fricker's contribution to this conversation, which is given more as a clarifying example of hermeneutical injustice rather than an argument about the ontology of homosexuality (Fricker, 2007), seems to align more with a "naively essentialist"¹³ framework: homosexuals are people who grow up in a heterosexual world with desires that are "not heterosexual," and therefore have to come across the correct hermeneutical resources to come out as homosexual. There is no real reason, however, why Fricker's perspective would be incompatible with a more nuanced understanding of social categories: we ought not to think that there is a "homosexual feeling" that needs to be necessarily "understood as homosexual,"¹⁴ but rather that some feelings and desires "do not fit," or "are not easily satisfied" inside the possibilities afforded by the available concepts and identities of a society, and therefore they need alternative hermeneutical resources to emerge and organize as coherent entities.

Crucially, various kinds of desires in need of understanding (I would define them "hermeneutically underserved") can emerge under the same concept or identity, and what we could hypothesize as "the same desire" can emerge under different labels, words, or framings (Díaz-León, 2017). "*Coming out really is not the revealing of the desire, but the interpretation and creation of these experiences in light of available social categories*" (Wilkerson, 2009), and different periods in history have different sets of available social categories, leaving, each time, different areas of human erotic desires hermeneutically marginalized.

Going back to the beginning of this article, this is how I propose to frame the influence of the Internet, of media, and of densely populated urban centers on queer subjectification. All of these techno-social realities, in fact, favor the circulation of alternatives for self-understanding and subjectification, as well as the space for engaging safely with the idea of not recognizing oneself inside the already provided sexual models. People in contexts where identification

with queerness is rendered impossible because of the unavailability of approachable and positive examples of it are largely helped in this by the Internet or media, or simply by living in a large city. These socio-technologies all iterate on the unexpressed potential of underserved desires.

Eromenos, erastes, and erotic schematism

Different societies provide each member with different “sets” of available hermeneutical tools to make sense of the bubbling cauldron that is the ever-shifting makeup of the subjective sexual desires of different people. In my reconstruction of the recent history of homosexuality, I described how most European societies, even after the invention of the concept of homosexuality, did not readily provide it to all the people who might have needed it. In a heteronormative society, many people have to “come across” the idea that non-heterosexuals even exist, or they might find alternative labels to be laced with stigma, making them less desirable as options for self-identification. Regardless, modern “homosexuals” were able to receive and incorporate this category for themselves; what happens, however, when such a category is not available? Let us go back to the example of Roman antiquity, to try and solve the crucial question of “. . . *did they like it?*”

In many historical reconstructions (Boswell, 1990; Cantarella, 1994, 2016) of ancient Roman (and Greek) sexual modes, the Roman male constructed his masculinity on sexual prowess, and whether he exerted such dominant erotic posture on women or men of inferior status did not make much of a difference in his social standing. The normal “male” of the time, as a sexual model, was able to provide space for the satisfaction of a wider variety of desires than our modern version of it.¹⁵ This means that many of the drives that in modernity are excluded from the approved sexual model of the normal “male,” and that find refuge in the qualifier and social identity of “homosexual,” simply did not need to build such an alternative conceptual and social space. What was excluded was, often, sexual submission or passivity, interpreted as a form of femininity and exemplified by the already mentioned scare-image of the *cinaedus*.

If we are to agree with Dall’orto (2015) and grant that the *cinaedus* was in fact a community of people that, even if stigmatized from the outside, recognized in each other the same kind of “desire” or “sexual orientation,” we still might recognize that they were a peculiar kind of “homosexual.” We might outright refrain from using the word “homosexual,” not merely because of our zeal in not imposing current language to past cultures, but also because this label could be too wide: “homosexual” does not only describe sexual submission and the associated male femininity, especially in a context where other “homosexual” desires can be embodied by the masculine, dominant opposite.¹⁶ If, however, we do decide to use the word “homosexual,” we

might be able to more accurately adapt its semantic range by adopting the framework I propose.

The famed Greek practice of the initiatory education period, where young adult men would “love” younger boys, later somewhat adopted by Roman society (Cantarella & Cuilleánáin, 1994), has also often been debated as a locus (or not) of “homosexuality before homosexuality.” The relationship between *eromenos* and *erastes*, said Cantarella (2016), is regulated by numerous rules of behavior and taboos, the ages of the lovers (both needed to be young: the “lover,” or *erastes*, was generally a new adult, while the beloved, the “*eromenos*,” was younger) being one of them. This kind of social formation is at odds with what we conceive as “homosexuality,” even if we are to understand it as an erotic “male with male” relationship. The age difference between the *erastes* and the younger *eromenos*, for instance, is not only generally unacceptable in most modern contexts, but is inscribed in a social practice that marks a specific period of the lovers’ lives: boys are considered desirable only inside certain age limits and the relationship is by its nature temporary, as it has to finish for the “heterosexual,” adult part of life to begin for both lovers. Moreover, any Greek man of suitable status might, potentially, participate in this social institution for a while, either as *eromenos* or *erastes*. Our standard understanding of homosexuality, however, is incompatible with these rules: a “sexual orientation” is an inherent and temporally stable quality of some, and crucially not all, individuals in society who engage in same sex eroticism as a (at least ideally) life-long mode of behavior that is, just as consistently, not engaged in by “straight” individuals. The “essentialist question,” however, remains lurking behind the curtains: Could it be that we are just witnessing a particularly creative form of ritualizing a homosexual orientation? In other words, did the Greeks *like* it?

The answer to this question, which the model I am proposing allows us to hypothesize, is quite simple: as with many things in life, some did, and some did not.¹⁷ Moreover, people who “liked it” might have done so not necessarily because of their “homosexuality,” but because the *eromenos-erastes* dynamic was a generally approved social dynamic, a locus for the exertion of virtue, the gaining of status, or simply a genuine human connection.¹⁸ This social structure, in other words, offered framing and avenues for action to many different desires, some of which (but not all) might now find their place inside the category “homosexuality.” A clue toward this interpretation, I argue, is that, while Greek society deemed inappropriate for these kinds of relationships to continue after maturity, some people did contravene such rules: famous is the bond between Achilles and Patroclus, but Cantarella (2016) cited many examples where the lovers remain such well into adulthood. Among the many different people taking part in this peculiar practice for other reasons and to satisfy other drives, we could say that, for some, the *eromenos-erastes* dynamic was the framing under which to express desires that could, today, just as well

emerge as “homosexual.” In each society, desires emerge as visible and identifiable only under the contextual hermeneutical categories that are typical of that society; their quality “before” this emergence is not readable in the same way that individual people’s sexual experience is not readable, and one can only make hypotheses about what other categories (like “homosexual”) might “fit” them. The resulting theory of sexuality is a kind of Kantian schematism (Kant, 2009 [1781])¹⁹ of eroticism, where unknowable pre-categorized desires (which Wilkerson mentions as “ur-desires” (Wilkerson, 2007, p. 148) or “pure desires” (Wilkerson, 2007: 151)),²⁰ like noumena, are only able to be verbalized after going through the grid of social categorization. This is well explained by Esa Díaz-León, elaborating on Wilkerson’s theory:

Our sexual desires and feelings can be conceptualized in different ways, that is, according to different concepts and classification systems, and the experiences and desires themselves do not fully determine which concept or classification system we must use at a certain occasion (since there are several conceptual schemes that are equally apt) (Díaz-León, 2017).

Connection density and queer subjectification

In the previous paragraph, I argued how available social structures can act as hermeneutical tools and as avenues for the satisfaction of wide arrays of desires and how people now organizing their drives inside the framing of “homosexual” might have expressed the same drives inside other structures in other cultural and historical contexts, and vice versa. This has been an exercise in applying Wilkerson’s (2007) general contribution, with some linguistic influences from Fricker’s, to historiography. What I consider particularly innovative about this article, however, is what happens when, using this understanding, we focus on the idea that I previously mentioned, that desires that are not easily framed under the available social categories are hermeneutically marginalized, and therefore come to constitute a need to look for alternatives.

Many times, in fact, both then and now, erotic desires do not find hermeneutical recognition and therefore a usable avenue to emerge in the public sphere and build shared practices. After all, this is the basis of Fricker’s perspective on the hermeneutical marginalization of LGBT+ people, and it is also one of the main problems with focusing, in our search for historical queerness, on explicit societal structures (similar as they might be to modern “homosexuality”), because doing so invisibilizes the common experience of the “closet,” that is of existing unnoticed, under the public sphere of recognized sexual models.

While understanding that embodying an identity or understanding our sexual desires in a social category allows us to further our adherence to it (Wilkerson, 2009), we also understand that, for many people, some desires

“push” against the limits of these categories; they seek other conceptualizations and therefore form a potential for the formulation and adoption of new categories and self-concepts.

I described how certain desires that today emerge as homosexual could be hypothesized to have been suitably framed under the ancient social roles of *cinaedus*, *eromenos*, *erastes*, or even under the standard understanding of a Roman dominant male. I also described how, when the categories that are readily offered to the individual are lacking with respect to the framing of certain desires, some people become in need of alternatives, and they might satisfy such need by bending the limits of available categories (like *eromenos* and *erastes* staying together longer than formally allowed). One might already use this understanding for tracing a version of gay history that, instead of focusing on the sexual orientation of individuals, hypothesises the specific avenues, in each society, for the expression of desires that we could understand to be, in some way, “homosexual”. Essentially, this kind of gay history might look like how I explained the possible “homosexuality” of Greek *eromenos*/*erastes* dynamics. Simply put, it would be about arguing about whether, and to what extent, past social structures could offer hermeneutical satisfaction to people who would today find it under the category “homosexual”. A similar thing to what we do, today, when we assume somebody to be “homosexual”, but with an added level of uncertainty that is unavoidable when making hypothesis about people who lived many years ago.

The more relevant, and maybe more epistemically sound, dynamic in my framework is about people with hermeneutically underserved desires coming across more niche hermeneutical options (like modern homosexuals finding themselves in urban centres or thanks to media). In the previous paragraphs I went over the theme of “ancient homosexuality” in order to explain and provide data on how to understand sexual orientation and history. The crucial passage that I want to contribute here is that, thanks to this theoretical basis, the historian becomes able to do something more than simply hypothesise the “overlap” between ancient sexual categorizations and new ones. The historian becomes able to hypothesise the kinds of desires that, in a society, are left underserved, and can look for possible signs of their emergence in loci of increased human connection.

In addition to simply carrying queer discourse and delivering it to the more isolated members of the community, however, I argue that we are to see urban centers, media, and online technologies as catalysts for their creation. While, in fact, “homosexual” might have been brewed, as a category of people, inside the field of psychiatry, and only later disseminated and wielded by “homosexuals” as a self-understanding tool, I propose that new concepts for self-understanding, new hermeneutical resources to make hidden desires emerge, are not only shared but also developed thanks to the ability of people with underserved desires to connect and mingle.

In arguing for this, I am referring to the local, underground circles of “sodomites” dotting medieval cities (Boswell, 2015; Dall’orto, 2015; Towler and; Boswell, 1981): it is true that institutions of the time mainly dealt with them by punishing the crime, or the sin of sodomy, but these “sodomites” shared a geography of gathering spaces, a set of erotic practices, and they likely understood each other to “like the same things” that other people might not enjoy, even though they might not have framed such conceptualizations as being “a kind of person” in the same way that the modern notions of sexual orientation do. If we are to accept the fact that a small number of people might find themselves unable to understand their drives under the social structures and the concepts available to them in society, we should also accept that, in spaces where a “critical mass” of such people is present and likely to mingle, they might find commonalities, share experiences, engage in new sexual practices, and even build communities. The fundamental idea that I am arguing in favor, here, is that many people, being able to mingle together, not only inform each other about preexisting alternative social categories around sexuality, but also formulate new shared ways of understanding specific methods of experiencing eroticism, as they can come across and sympathize with other people who might be harboring similarly underserved desires or taking part in similarly misunderstood behaviors. I am, here, elaborating on the same dynamic noticed by Miranda Fricker as she illustrated how the concept of sexual harassment was born: groups of women gathering and finding out that they shared the same kind of experiences about demeaning remarks or behaviors from male colleagues, which, by themselves, did not fit in the already present categories of sexual violence, and therefore needed a new, more specific, conceptualization (Fricker, 2007). The same, I argue, can be said to happen in places harboring a “critical mass” of people, for LGBT+ identities (and not only “homosexual” ones).

Cities, I argue, are the spaces where, across history (and culture), this “critical mass” of people with underserved desires is likely to gather before the inception of contemporary mass media. In many different societies, we could hypothesize that cities were places where alternative sexual models were able to be developed, probably among very restricted groups of peers, not particularly larger than friend groups. Every time, these models were probably representative of the desires and behaviors most hermeneutically marginalized by society (and, therefore, not necessarily an older version of “homosexual”). Most interestingly, for the largest part of Western history, these “bubbles” of hermeneutical emergence were as short-lived as their relative social groups: maybe we are talking about very vague group identities or words for sexual gatherings, and not theoretical formulations about the nature of sexuality.

Modern media and the Internet are newer loci of connection density, and they operate the same effects that cities have on the sexual categorizations of a culture: they allow for multiplication, often developing a finer mesh of

meaning that adapts to increasingly specific emerging kinds of eroticism. According to this frameworks, alternative sexual models might have been born and died many times, like short-lived hermeneutical bubbles, around clandestine gatherings of deviants: “homosexual” might not have been the first time that hermeneutical liberation was offered to people of marginalized sexual experience; it simply might have been the first time the new label, carried by the powerful scientific institutions of modern nations as well as by the human mingling of increasingly populated industrial centers of the time and by print media, became part of mainstream knowledge on sexuality.

Foucauldian constructivism tends to take a “zoomed out” perspective on society: under its lens, specific kinds of discourses and models, usually elaborated by powerful institutions, are described as characteristic of a society as a whole, until a sudden epistemic shift determines their quick demise in favor of similarly all-encompassing systems of managing social behavior. “Homosexual” is not about “homosexuals,” but it is about the institution of psychiatry and about how it represents a modern form of societal control. The kinds of “epistemic shifts” that I am interested in, and that I suggest on focusing on in the development of queer history, are much more niche: they do not involve large institutions but, ideally, small and local communities of people who, almost by serendipity, come to recognize, among each other, that they tend to *like* practices and behaviors that are not accounted for by wider society.

Queer history, I argue, might find that multiple times in different historical and cultural contexts underground urban sexual networks might have come to develop their own specific kind of queerness, and that rarely these newly developed concepts and practices were able to be spread outside of very local circles, let alone come to build an “institution.” At one point, in industrializing Europe, the growing interest of burgeoning social sciences toward sexual deviance, powered by the debut of mass media, was able to popularize specific kinds of identifiers for sexual deviants: invert, homosexual, tribad, and similar concepts were distilled from niche discourses (both from insiders and outsiders looking in these minority groups) on sexuality and spread far and wide. These new framings of erotic desire were, yes, powerful biopolitical tools to produce straight conformity (Foucault’s perspective), but they also were liberatory labels for “other kinds” of people to adopt (Fricker’s perspective). Early queer movements themselves, adopting these qualifiers as well as elaborating new ones (“gay,” “lesbian,” or “queer”), further increased their spread by building political movements and adopting the use of more and more popular media able to reach isolated places (Meeker, 2006). Lastly, the Internet allowed an even more distributed, anonymous, and accessible form of human mingling, perfect for further popularization of already available identifiers and the development of newer ones (Jacobsen et al., 2022). This history, the history of “homosexual” as a category supported by its “sexual communication

network,” is a peculiar example: maybe the first occurrence of a niche alternative categorization for one’s sexuality to far beyond its original context, breaching the mainstream and demonstrating a staying power for more than a century. This could have happened simply due to the technological affordances of modernity: its “loci of increased human connection,” the dense urbanization, print media, and the Internet.

The history of the spread of queer labels and concepts, however, remains meaningless without the reasons for people to use and wear them: understanding and organizing underserved desires. This theoretical step allows us to fathom the idea that people sharing the same “label,” or the same public framing of their sexuality, might not share the same inner world, and that, in fact, there could be historical stratification in what kind of people understand themselves as “homosexual” in different decades (which is the focus of my current research). Moreover, and most importantly to historians, following this throughline allows us to understand “homosexuality” in continuity with other forms of organizing sexuality: not only its epistemic scope could have been included in other conceptual structures at different times (and for different people), but “homosexuality” is also revealed not as a unicum, an unprecedented “epistemic shift” typical of modernity, but only one of the most fortunate instances of underserved desires emerging thanks to how the density of human connections allowed people to share experiences and conceptualize their difference into a common frame.

The resulting history is, I argue, not a history of the concept “homosexuality,” not a collection of clues about the supposed “homosexual orientation” of certain members of ancient societies, but a nuanced inquiry about the dialectic between erotic desires and our ways of framing them. A history of homosexuality, and of queer people in general, becomes able to handle, merge, and compare different categorizations of sexuality by hypothesizing their hermeneutical “range.” Most importantly, history requires an analysis of the technologies and social realities of dense human connectivity, able to develop sexual communication networks and therefore unfold sexuality into a finer mesh than the already present normative, hegemonic, or “straight” matrix of meaning. Queer history is not only a zoomed-out reconstruction of how hegemonic gender roles shaped identity and sexual behavior across history, but also a zoomed-in inquiry about possible niche “hermeneutical bubbles,” or the temporary emergence (and disappearance) of alternative sexual models localized as “sexual communication networks” at loci of increased human connection.²¹

Notes

1. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and all other labels identifying gender and sexual variant people. In this article, I will also use “queer” to refer to the same group.

2. While this section might appear as naively techno-optimistic, I do want to recall contemporary, more skeptical accounts on the Internet as an avenue for liberation (Anderson & Roth, 2020; Monea, 2022). The perspective I want to convey in this article is independent of whether we take an optimistic or pessimistic view of the Internet.
3. In this passage, I alternate between using “gay and lesbian” and the more generic “queer” because, while Meeker’s (2006) study is specific to gay and lesbian media, I consider these theorizations to be largely applicable to queer identification processes in general.
4. My arguments will be mainly tailored to male homosexuality, for the sake of simplicity, brevity, and because of the already available data gathered on it by historians. I consider my theory, however, to be largely applicable to many of the identities under the LGBT+ umbrella, although I do not have the tools to argue in favor of this in more detail.
5. Meeker focuses on gay and lesbian communities, and this article is going to mainly focus on the gay male experience. The theory I propose, as I will discuss at the end of this article, is supposed to be applicable to queer existence in general. It is only in the interest of clarity that I will employ a gay-centric perspective.
6. Italian medieval and Renaissance urban centers are often cited for harboring such groups (Boswell, 2015).
7. One could understand the disagreements explained in this article as a new iteration of the longstanding debate, in LGBT+ historiography, between “essentialism” and “social constructionism” (Halwani, 1998, 2006), where the essentialist argues for the existence of a diachronic “feeling of attraction” defining homosexuals across history, and the social constructionist argues that sexual identity is always contextual and that one should avoid extending the category “homosexual” to pre-modern societies. This framing, however, is somewhat old-fashioned, as the polarization of the two sides has been renegotiated multiple times (2002; Barber et al., 2002; Boswell, 1990). Moreover, the disagreement renegotiated here is not about the ontology of sexual orientation itself; Dall’Orto never makes an ontological argument about the nature of sexual orientation and, instead, bases his historical reconstruction on the idea that homosexual identity encompasses multiple variations of sexuality. The more relevant disagreement between the authors I consider in this article is about the applicability of the term “homosexuality” itself for pre-modern and/or non-European contexts, and whether it is possible that, before modernity, people could have theorized versions of our modern understanding of sexual orientation.
8. The *cinaedus* is one of the often-cited examples of possible “homosexuals” existing in antiquity. Its definition as “homosexual” is debated, and this debate is crucial to the arguments I provide in this article. Generally, however, it can be said that the *cinaedi* were stigmatized effeminate males, likely associated with male-male sexuality and prostitution, populating the urban centers of ancient Rome; a kind of “sissy” of the ancient world (Clarke, 2005; Dall’orto, 2015; Halperin, 2007).
9. I can’t help but comment, here, that some aspects of how the *cinaedus* is stigmatized because of his gender variance actually overlap with how contemporary homosexuals are stigmatized: same-sex attraction is coded as feminine and therefore is to be excised in any real man (Burgio, 2017). This is clearly shown by how homophobia is often directed toward the most feminine gay men, often with no real proof of their sexual passivity or even their homosexuality.
10. Wilkerson’s “stronger” claim, that sexual desires are in part caused by our choices about the interpretation of them, has been contested by some voices (Díaz-León, 2017). In this article, I consider this particular issue inconsequential to my thesis. Regardless of the ultimate (innate or not) origin of erotic desires, in fact, I am interested in the different

ways in which different societies frame them under their cultural categories. Wilkerson names his theory of sexuality “emerging fusion.”

11. I define essentialism about homosexuality as the idea that, to be a homosexual, an individual has to clearly possess an identifiable characteristic, namely the same “same-sex attraction” that is therefore “the same” among all homosexuals. I explained, in the previous section, what I consider dubious (and not) about such a perspective when I described the limits of extending the category of homosexuality to people who themselves do not adopt it.
12. One might say that my stress on “pre-verbal” desires or, later, “underserved desires” is somewhat essentialist. I consider my perspective not essentialist with regard to the idea that homosexuality is socially constructed as such and can satisfy a changing and wide range of different, more specific, pre-verbal desires. However, I do believe that people can be “essentially” different in their inner desires, regardless of whether such desires are themselves caused by their social conditioning or not, or whether such a distinction is even valid as a concept.
13. I use the term “naively essentialist” here not to describe opinions shared by scholars cited in this article, but the common understanding about queer people exemplified by the “born this way” argument (Bennett, 2014), largely constituting the ideas about homosexuality of many people.
14. It can be said that, by using the concept of “erotic desires,” I am providing an essentialist account of homosexuality. If we accept that essentialism about homosexuality is the idea for which belonging into the category of homosexuality is dependant on sharing one (or a set of) clearly defined essential characteristic (Braisby et al., 2009), my perspective is not essentialist because I do not identify a specific, clear feeling or experience of “same-sex attraction” that is necessary to understand oneself as homosexual. In fact, I argue that there are many different possible experiences or feelings that can be found, for each individual, hermeneutical satisfaction under the category “homosexual.”
15. This could also mean that a Roman male could engage sexually with other men even if he did not *like* it, *per se*: expressing pure “sexual dominance” could, in fact, be one of the “desires” satisfied through such behavior that we would not necessarily see as a “homosexual orientation.”
16. It has to be said, here, that the modern “homosexual” has, especially in the slurs associated, a similar vicinity to sexual submission and femininity. The rationalistic idea that a homosexual is “a man who is attracted to other men” and has no ties to gender identity can be an abstraction. We can see a similarity to the Roman model in how, outside the abstracted concept, the modern homosexual receptive role (bottoming) is more stigmatized (and, indeed, thought of as “gay”) than the insertive role. This is in continuity with the popular, in anthropology, model of sex and gender developed by Gayle Rubin (1975), where the neat separation of men and women also requires heterosexuality.
17. Wilkerson’s theory of sexual orientation suggests that a person, after framing their sexual desires in a socially determined categorization, is encouraged to develop further erotic feelings in line with such categorization. My understanding does not desire to deny this, as I consider this to be true. At the same time, I am maintaining, in this passage, that some Greeks might still “like” (be this liking a consequence or not of taking part in this social category) the eromenos/erastes bond “more” than others, or more “sexually” than others.
18. Cantarella suggests that this relationship was also one of the more authentic avenues for male friendship in ancient Greece, due to the low level of education and status granted to

Greek women and wives, who could not engage in the same kind of “equal” friendship (Cantarella & Cuilleánáin, 1994).

19. The comparison to Kant’s philosophical concept of schematism is mine. I consider it a clarifying image for the understanding of sexual orientation I am in favor of, although I do not claim philosophical continuity with Kantian philosophies.
20. One could object that, by proposing the concept of pre-categorized desires, or underserved desires, I am simply recreating the essentialist problem of identifying “same-sex desire.” I argue that this is not the case, as these “underserved desires” avoid identification, and their “demonstration” in individuals is not how I propose to conduct historiography. Still, I agree with Wilkerson (2007, pp. 148–155) in saying that their existence is a necessary “concession” to the essentialist argument, and that we ought to think that the differences in people’s choices in social categories can be attributed, in part, to them.
21. I focused this article on two main themes: homosexuality (as opposed to the wider label “queer” or the acronym LGBT+) and history (as opposed to geographic and cultural distance). I did so because specificity, in this context, is more conducive to the clarity of my arguments and is better able to communicate with available literature. However, the considerations I am arguing in favor of are to be understood, at least ideally, as open to many identities in the LGBT+ umbrella, and also to the effort to decenter modern Western categories (such as homosexuality or queerness itself) in the discussion of gender and sexual difference across countries and cultures.

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