

Maya De Leo, *Queer. Storia Culturale della Comunità LGBT+*

Einaudi, Torino, 2023

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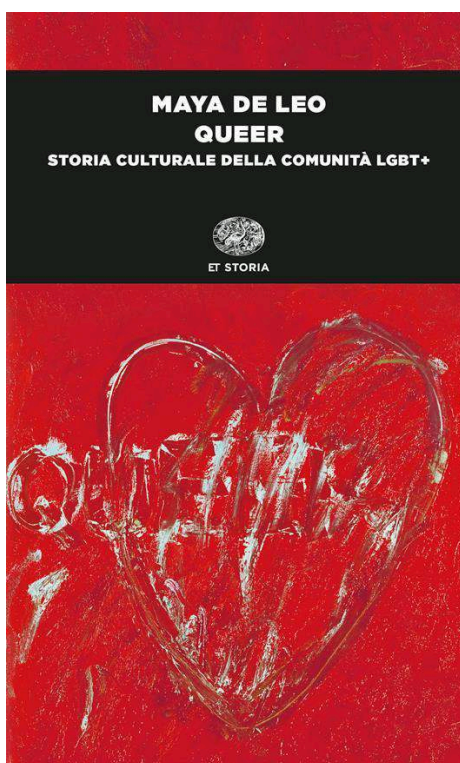
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MAYA DE LEO, *Queer. Storia Culturale della Comunità LGBT+*, Einaudi, Torino, 2023.

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- 1 *Queer. Storia della Comunità LGBT+* is an Italian essay on the cultural history of the LGBT+ community-understood as a heterogeneous group spread across diverse cultural and geographical settings (p. V). The book describes a transhistorical, transcultural and political movement, what Maya De Leo defines: “a transnational community which formulates rhetorical, political and existential strategies to negotiate its own spaces of livability” (p. VI). The word “queer” and its various connotations play a central role within the work. Firstly, *queer* serves as an umbrella term for non-normative identities explored throughout the text. Secondly, *queer* is also used in its verbal form, that is, as a methodological approach to revise the act of writing history in order to reveal the ‘queer desire for history’ (p. IX) that drove the author during the process of writing. Finally, *queer* is innovatively employed as a new perspective on identity construction that can be used to reinterpret contemporary history. In other words, *queer* becomes a category of historical analysis which interrogates the production of power and its objectification (p. VIII). To achieve this, De Leo adopts a deconstructive and deneutralizing approach to identity, spanning from the 1700s to contemporary times by investigating three levels of cultural-historical phenomena in the United States and Europe: mechanisms of power and normativity, community discourse and (self-)narration.
- 2 Maya De Leo interprets history in both genealogical and anti-genealogical terms, insisting on its non-linearity. She focuses on the intersection of identities over the long term to understand the process of definition of LGBT+ minorities. The starting point of the book is the notion of sexual orientation developed in the 18th century. According to De Leo, sexual orientation stems from: “the more general transformations that have affected sexuality and gender since the 18th century” (p. 11). From this century onward, the sodomite is no longer considered a legal subject, but rather a person with behavioral traits that must be investigated (p. 32). The 18th century also marks the emergence of gender binarism, which culminates in the conceptualization of femininity as a reproductive function and masculinity as a performance of virility during the 20th century. For De Leo, gender binarism led to heteronormativity, which developed as a dominant mechanism after the First World War, during which men were also encouraged toward marriage and fatherhood (p. 79). Despite these rigid characterizations, sexuality and gender identity are positively re-evaluated in the mid-1920s through the work of sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (p. 92).
- 3 A regression in the historical process of gender occurs with the rise of Nazi-fascism, during which minorities are persecuted until the contradictory post-war period. While on the one hand a widespread *gay panic* emerges in reaction to the Kinsey report (p.



177), on the other hand new forms of associationism begin to take shape. These will be brutally hindered by the AIDS crisis, in which, according to De Leo, scientific and media narratives collaborate to reaffirm monogamous heterosexuality—a dynamic whose consequences persist to this day (p. 278).

- 4 Maya De Leo investigates the mechanisms of power within the communitarian discourse using a historiographical lens which underlines the contradictions inside the community. The starting point is the bar culture tradition which developed at the end of the 19th century in Paris and Berlin, and which would continue for decades. The homophile movement, composed of intellectual homosexuals, arose in opposition to this subculture, as they wanted to embrace a more decorous style (p. 202). However, a new configuration of the LGBT+ community originates with the Stonewall Riots shortly after the death of Judy Garland. This event marks the end of the so-called *rainbow period*, as respectability gave way to visibility and politics (p. 214). From the 1970s, the community intertwined with feminist consciousness-raising groups and with African-American movements. Associations such as GLF and Radicalesbians were born, although they often excluded trans and Black people. The collective mourning surrounding AIDS revived the community, fostering a new activism focused on civil rights. According to De Leo, this activism has continued through the use of digital technologies, which encourage the visibility of non-binary, intersex and asexual subjectivities (p. 299). For De Leo, the communitarian discourse is closely related to art. She emphasizes the importance of (self-)narration in the process of queer visibility through the display of a wide range of historical sources. For instance, lesbian existence is made visible as early as the 19th century through Delarivier Manley's writings on female erotic pleasure (p. 24). Moreover, gender norms were already challenged at the beginning of the 20th century through drag or music-hall representations. Literature also plays a crucial role in queer visibility, especially with the proliferation of the lesbian pulp romance novels such as *The Price of Salt* (1952) (p. 185). The peculiarity of the LGBT+ community is its use of language and representation. This is evident in the 1950s with the emergence of *camp* as a cultural code enabling recognition and aesthetic expression (p. 211). The vocabulary surrounding sexuality also evolved in the 1970s, through feminist works such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1970) (p. 217). Queer language began to gain institutional recognition in academia starting in the 1990s through the development of queer studies, which focus on the destruction of heteronormativity and the gender system through an intersectional approach (pp. 297-298).
- 5 *Queer. Storia della Comunità LGBT+* (2023) is the second edition reprinted in paperback, following the significant success of the first edition published in 2021. *Queer* is an ambitious book, the result of years of research work carried out for the course on the history of homosexuality at the University of Turin. Maya De Leo proposes a cultural, intersectional and transdisciplinary historical approach to be applied to the political movements of the LGBT+ community. Her main reference is historian Joan Wallach Scott, particularly her claims on gender as a critical category of historical analysis. Following this approach, De Leo theorizes queer as a category capable of explaining history, affirming the historical relevance of LGBT+ individuals. This methodology is intertwined with approaches and theories from cultural studies (Michel Foucault), queer theory (Judith Butler, Paul Preciado), posthuman feminism (Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti) and decolonial theory (María Lugones). In her understanding of the historical

processes, De Leo defines history not only as a cultural and historiographical inquiry, but also as a collaborative endeavor aimed at returning knowledge to the community.

- 6 In terms of structure and organization, the book is divided into three parts. The essay opens with a foreword by the author in which she states her use of terminology and her objectives. Maya De Leo particularly emphasizes that the categories of gender and sexuality are not natural and ahistorical, but constructed within the mechanisms of power (p. VII). The first part, 'Archaeology of the LGBT+ Community' spans from the 18th to the 20th century and focuses on the construction of identity through medical and legislative discourse. The second part, 'Rise and Fall of the Closet' covers the early 20th century until the 1960s, exploring spaces of community creation, oppression and resistance. The third part, 'Revolutions, Resistances, Intersections' comprises the period from the 1960s to the present, centering on the political history of the queer community, particularly its activism.
- 7 In the epilogue, De Leo focuses on the potential of queer history. The process of historical investigation is essential not only for understanding the past, but also for envisioning a decentralized future beyond the current gender system. According to De Leo, the LGBT+ community should be recognized as a vanguard force capable of destabilizing Western constructs of gender and sexuality by proposing a new regulatory framework that "will no longer be called sexuality" (pp. 319-320). As for the auxiliary parts of the text, the book concludes with bibliographical notes, an alphabetical index of names, and a general index. *Queer* can be considered the first long-term synthesis work on the history of the LGBT+ community in Europe and in the United States. While it addresses complex issues across a vast historical and textual scope, devoting relatively little attention to the history of bisexuality, *Queer* remains a pioneering book that fills a gap in transnational publications. The essay is an essential reading for students and scholars seeking new methodologies of cultural history of the LGBT+ community, but also for those searching for a study guide that provides a multifaceted perspective of the historical process that led to the emergence of the queer community. I highly recommend it because of its methodological and interdisciplinary innovations. I also believe that this publication may signal the rise of new approaches to political history or anthropology focused on the cultural narratives of identities or nations. I am looking forward to the English translation of the book, which will surely stimulate further academic engagement around the topic.

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