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“Querying the Past: intergenerational conversations and queer community” Johnna Ossie

My name is Johnna Ossie; I’m an undergraduate research student at the University of Southern Maine. Today I’m going to talk about my research on the *Querying the Past Project: Maine LGBTQ Oral History Project* and how that shaped my current ideas about intergenerational community among queer people, and how necessary those connections are.

When I was ten, my father said to me at dinner, “I don’t care what people do in their bedrooms, but I don’t want to see it in public.” In my family, being gay was something to be kept in the shadows. It wasn’t the worst thing you could be, but it was also not something that you were supposed to talk about and definitely not something to exist as in public.

As a young queer person, I had limited access to queer elders. Growing up, I had an extremely narrow idea of what it meant to be queer and had almost no access to queer people who were older than me. This absence of queer role models affected my self-image and delayed me from living as fully myself for many years. I have a lot of sadness about how much time I wasted pretending to be something I wasn’t.

My idea of being gay was something that had to do with deviant sexuality. It didn’t occur to me that being gay had anything to do with love, relationships, or happiness, or that it could be something joyful or worthy of celebration. As young as 11, I was thinking I might be gay and I was terrified. I knew no one in my immediate community who was gay apart from one openly lesbian teacher. I now often wonder how that would have been different if I had access to queer elders to share stories with me.

Over the past two years, the *Querying the Past Project* has allowed me, as a young queer person, to work directly with queer elders, hearing their stories and learning about the queer history of my own community. I’ve learned many things, including that one of the individuals interviewed had lived for twenty years in the neighborhood I grew up in, only several blocks from my parents’ home. I wonder what my life would have been like if I had known there were queer people living in my neighborhood. What if I could have interacted with those people, had seen them going about their days living normal lives? What would it have been like to know that queerness was all around me, and that it wasn’t a shameful secret I had to hide?

Before beginning this research, I had almost no knowledge of queer history in Maine. The oral history project has been an incredible education for me. I have conducted nine 90-minute life history interviews with members of the LGBTQ community and provided research assistance for dozens more.

Through the *Querying the Past Project* I have been confronted with my own pre-existing ideas about queer elders and observed how those ideas have shifted over the course of my research. When I began my research, I did not expect to have much in common with the individuals I was

interviewing because of the generational divide. But many of their stories resonated deeply with me.

The American Society on Aging defines four living Generations of LGBT Americans; the oldest of these is the so-called “Silent Generation,” born between 1925 and 1945. This group lived most of their lives in a time of extreme discrimination and hostility against LGBT populations and came of age in a time when there was little to no public conversation about LGBT life. Many in this generation struggled to openly identify as LGBT in fear of discrimination, social rejection, or outright violence (Johnston 2017, Fredriksen-Goldsen 2016). Hearing concrete examples of how this played out in the lives of those I was interviewing brought this to light for me.

For example, I interviewed Bunny Hart, who was born in 1930. Bunny lived for 39 years with her partner, Sheila. The two raised Sheila’s son Chris together in their home from the time he was nine in the small town of Ogunquit, Maine. But it wasn’t until after Sheila died in 2008 that Bunny and Chris discussed the fact that his mother and Bunny had been a couple. Bunny told me,

“[When] Sheila and I moved in here with Chris...we were very careful because we didn’t want...anything to happen with Chris...It was enough to have two women living together...Mother and a friend. But that was it, my mother and...a friend of hers....It wasn’t until years later after Sheila had died and I went down to visit Chris at one point ...And he said, ‘and how long were you and mom together?’ It was the first time it’d ever been acknowledged ...Sheila probably was turning over at that point because she was so careful not to indicate anything and I said...’How would you know, Chris?’ He said, ‘Instinctively I knew for a long time,’” (Ossie 2018).

The consequences of being openly identified as LGBT may have diminished somewhat for the subsequent generations. The so-called Baby Boomers, many of whom came of age in the late 1960s, and so-called Generation X, born in the mid 1960s to 1980, for example, came of age during a time of major advancements in the fight for gay rights. But, they report higher levels of victimization, social isolation and loneliness compared to those who came before them (Fredriksen-Goldsen 2016).

My anxieties as a millennial queer person were actually disturbingly similar in many ways to the experiences of those who came out in the generations before me. They, too, often had no queer role models in their community. Many felt completely isolated and most expressed an early and profound feeling of difference. Despite the fact that much has changed for the LGBTQ community over the past few decades, there was still so much in their stories that seemed dreadfully the same as mine.

For example, J. Dionne, who was born in 1979, told me:

“...When I started to feel that I was gay... it became just another piece of evidence to....show me that I didn’t exist, or that I wasn’t worth existing, and it doesn’t get better from there. You know, we need to catch [that self-hate] in the moment [it begins]. So, I think I’d like for queer youth.... to immediately share their experience with some other human being. And imagine the richness if I’d had this opportunity at thirteen and fifteen,

and it was reacted to very differently. If somebody had said, 'Oh, that's how you're feeling, I hear you, I see you,' instead of any other choices that were made." (Ossie and Paradis 2017).

In J. Dionne's case, those other choices involved years of attempted conversion therapy.

While hearing these stories produced empathy and identification in me, there were still many generational divides revealed in the interviews. There are, of course, important differences in the ways young queer people and older queer people look at gender and identity and the language we use to talk about those issues. If no effort is made to bridge those differences, however, they can create barriers to intergenerational community and conversation.

Even the language we use to describe ourselves can create obstacles to understanding each other. For instance, Bunny Hart, now 88, told me she didn't understand how anyone could call themselves "queer." Hart grew up in a time where the word queer was hurled at people like her. For her, the word was still heavy with the weight of judgement and discrimination. Bunny told me,

"...In my day, way back, people called us queer. We didn't feel queer at all and so, why the LGBT community is now saying, adding Q to it when I spent decades trying to say no, there's nothing queer about it." (Ossie 2018).

After her interview, Penny Rich, a lesbian in her 70s, suggested to me that there should be a class for older LGBTQ adults to learn about the language queer youth are using to describe their identities. She wanted to be able to use pronouns and talk about gender identity in ways that younger people do but she didn't know how and felt it kept her disconnected from younger queer spaces.

My research has shown me that queer people of all ages need to learn how to talk to each other. Generational disconnection is a loss for everyone in the queer community. LGBTQ elders have a deep well of stories and history to share and LGBTQ youth often have minimal knowledge of the queer history of the place they live, and little access to queer older adults to form meaningful connections with. Research shows that both youth and elders benefit when intergenerational connections are made. Not only do these connections challenge the isolation some elders experience and provide queer youth with role models, it also increases the likelihood that our history will be preserved.

Like other marginalized groups, queer people in America are often excluded from standard historical accounts. If we do not actively share our stories across generations, the risk is high that they will be lost. Oral history projects can serve as a tool to encourage young people to sit down with elders and look at them not only as fellow human beings but also as a critical part of our own history. Queer elders' stories reveal the ways that they often put their families, friendships, and careers on the line to fight for queer rights- rights that many in subsequent generations may now take for granted.

My own experience participating in cross-generational connections has changed my perspective as a young queer person. When I first began conducting interviews with the

Querying the Past Project I soon realized I held many preconceived notions about what older people had to offer- or rather didn't have to offer. Sadly, those biases are not unique to me but are rather widespread in the younger queer community. I now feel compelled by a certain sense of duty to look at the ways that the community pushes older adults to the margins. I also look at my own community with new eyes.

Oral history research can sometimes feel like stumbling upon a pile of old family journals and photo albums. All of a sudden, the place I live looks different to me. The empty lot at the corner of Forest and Cumberland becomes the 1970s gay bar where Penny Rich and her friends had to stop dancing and push the tables back together when the lights flashed alerting them that the police were there. The small town of Ogunquit becomes the place where Bunny and Sheila quietly raised a son and kept their romance a secret for 39 years. 1988 was the year my brother was born, but for me it is now also the year that one of the men I interviewed was diagnosed with HIV.

Sharing our stories is powerful. I'd like to end with this quote from one the research participants, J.Dionne, who ended his interview by telling me,

“I just really like that you're doing this...I was excited to come here today. It just feels good to know that no matter how my life has been, that it is a life worth sharing, being heard.... It feels good to feel as if I am valid, that I'm not more important than somebody else, but I'm not less important than somebody else. That I exist.” (Ossie and Paradis 2018).