Shame and the Struggle of Sexual Identity

By Brooke English

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the development and use of language in minority communities within the queer community from the beginning of the 20th century through today. The pre-Stonewall era is explored through two literary works, Quentin Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* (1997/1968) and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1990/1928), and the post-Stonewall era looks at two 21st century groups, the undocuqueer movement and the group of queer people who use Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), otherwise known as Truvada Whores. Drawing on analysis of the modern groups found in Hinda Seif's *Coming out of the Shadows* and *undocuqueer* and Tim Dean's *Mediated Intimacies*, I attempt to explain both the ways that language are used in each era as well as the reason for the differences between the two eras.

Internalized Shame and its Language
Queer identity and shame have always been linked and the connection between the queer community and external shame has been extensively studied. However, the shaming of non-normative and other minority identities within the queer community is a topic that has received less attention. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, internalized shame in the queer community revolved primarily around the shaming of non-normative gender expression, as seen in literary works from that time period. However, through the development of a homonormative identity and the rise of neoliberalization, new axes of discrimination, such as undocumented status and PrEP usage, have appeared and become dominant. Furthermore, the language used within these discriminated subsets of the queer community has shifted from self-deprecating to empowering.
Quentin Crisp’s *The Naked Civil Servant* (1997/1968) focuses on Crisp’s own experiences with rejection and shame for how he expresses his gender. The main source of Crisp’s shame stems from the homosexual community itself. Crisp goes against the gender norms of the homosexual community in his time, he must, “with every breath [he draws], with every step [he takes], demonstrate that [he is] feminine” (Crisp, 1997/1968, p. 21). The ‘normal’ members of the gay community frown upon Crisp’s expression because it conflicts with their idea of how gay people should act. Crisp’s presentation and public behavior “[spoil] it for the rest”, according to a gay American actor (Crisp, 1997/1968, p. 80). Crisp dares to defy the pre-established definition of homosexuality despite the backlash that he receives from other members of the homosexual community. Traditionally, homosexual people of this time were secretive and frequently denied their sexuality, even when they were caught in participating in homosexual acts. Edward Saragin, writing under the pen name Donald Webster Cory, references a report of a U.S. sailor who let “a stranger,” whom he believed to be homosexual, perform oral sex on him (Cory, 1951, p. 188). However, the sailor himself does not identify as a homosexual, despite complying in the sexual act. Crisp challenges this secrecy and it is this non-compliant expression that draws criticism.

Crisp’s descriptions of the shame that he feels in response to the criticism parallel early descriptions of homosexual feelings and serve as a condemnation of the evolving homosexual community. Crisp sees homosexuals as worse than heterosexuals in terms of discrimination, going as far as to say that “all heterosexuals, however low, [are] superior to any homosexual, however noble” (Crisp, 1997/1968, p. 62). The campy feel of the novel shows its strengths in its descriptions of the self-described illness that plagues Crisp. Crisp highlights the irony of the other gay people treating him much like their predecessors were treated, drawing on metaphors related to sickness and questioning why they think that “consumptives who coughed
ruined for others all the fun of tuberculosis” (Crisp, 1997/1968, p. 80). Crisp reclaims the language of disease, historically used as a negative way to describe homosexuality, and uses it to describe his pain that results from the rejection and hypervisibility that he experiences as a result of his gender expression. By pulling from this discriminatory language, Crisp highlights the isolated feelings and internal struggle with how he lives his life, that which sets himself apart from the ‘normal’ homosexuals.

The shaming of varying gender performance is not limited to just the male homosexual community in this time period, however. Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* portrays Stephen Gordon, a woman who struggles with both being a woman and her sexual preferences. Throughout the novel, she is compared to her father, especially in regard to appearance. She prefers traditionally male clothing and activities and in her own words, “being a girl [spoils] everything” (Hall, 1990/1928, p. 37). Her life is characterized by not a loneliness of identity but rather the loneliness of isolation caused by an inability to fit either in the invert community or ‘normal’ society. She shuns the invert community much like Crisp shuns the homosexual community. However, she cannot fully disassociate from the community and solemnly acknowledges that she will always be a part of it, as shown in Stephen's first visit to Alec's, a bar for inverts. Finding herself in the midst of everything that she hates and has tried to avoid, her initial response to the bar is one of disgust and repulsion. When she is approached by a youth who calls her “ma sœur,” she is angered at the fact that this person, who she sees as the lowest of the low, would call her one of his kind (Hall, 1990/1928 388). However, after she takes a second look at the boy, she recognizes the scars of a struggle that she herself faces and reluctantly accepts the label and calls him “mon frère” (Hall, 1990/1928, p. 389). The key difference between Stephen and the boy in the bar is that while the boy has given up his efforts to remain a part of ‘normal’ society, Stephen keeps up the fight, a “hapless creature... hopelessly pursued” (Hall, 1990/1928, p. 389).
Hall evokes the image of a persistently hunted animal to describe the kind of life that Stephen lives. Much like Crisp, Stephen lives a hypervisible life due to her dress and general manner. However, Stephen actively resists associating herself with the invert community and labeling herself as an invert whereas Crisp, although detesting the homosexual community, has embraced his identity, as much as he despises it. Stephen finds herself between two worlds, the invert community and society as a whole, but never completely in one or the other. The imagery and associated language of a constantly hunted animal captures the stress and isolation that Stephen feels, unable to rest or find solace in either of the spaces that she can occupy.

In the years since the publication of *The Well of Loneliness* and *The Naked Civil Servant*, the rise of a “new homonormativity” and neoliberal ideals have brought forth new non-normative identities for shaming (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). People in minority groups that do not fit into the golden standard of the ‘normal’ white, cis, middle-class, gay male, such as undocumented queer immigrants, are left by the wayside in almost all steps forward in progress for the queer community. Similarly, the neoliberal idea that what is sexual should be kept private has resulted in the shunning of new developments in preventative AIDS measures, such as the use of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), and those who use them. While language in the pre-Stonewall era was primarily used to describe pain and loneliness, minority communities within the queer community have begun to use language as a method of empowerment.

Born out of the intersection between the queer and undocumented immigrant communities, the undocuqueer movement challenges and complicates normative identities within both marginalized communities by adopting language from the queer community and the “coming out” narrative. Hinda Seif examines this particular usage of language in her paper “Coming out of the Shadows” and “undocuqueer”. In Seif’s paper, she interviews Julio, a member of the undocuqueer community, in which he shares why he
increasingly identifies with the term “queer.” In particular, Julio evokes the image of the so-called “mainstream” gay person, a “white, male, white picket fence ideal” that he does not see himself in (Seif, 2014, p. 90). Using the term “queer,” however, gives a way for Julio and other queer members of the undocumented immigrant community a freedom from imposed identities and an opportunity to embrace self-definition.

Their embracement not only of their undocumented status, which is shunned in the queer community, but their queer identity, which is shunned in the undocumented community, is only possible through this usage and adaptation of language. “Queer” is still a relatively new term in the Latino community, only coming into usage within the past decade, according to Julio (Seif, 2014, p. 90). However, as that term came into use, activist groups, primarily coming from the “1.5-generation” undocumented immigrants, began to form around their queerness and made moves towards strengthening the undocuqueer movement and the undocumented community in general. The first annual Coming out of the Shadows Day event took place on the steps of the Chicago Federal Building. Speaking about being undocumented in front of a federal building is a direct slap to the face of normative identity. This action is the undocuqueer community pushing for more visibility and recognition in the midst of a world that increasingly marginalizes them. Furthermore, it is actions like these that demonstrate the ability for minority communities to come together and define themselves using their own vocabulary rather than accept the labels placed on them.

A hotly debated and divisive topic in the queer community recently is the introduction and usage of PrEP, also known as Truvada, as a way to prevent the spread of AIDS. The stigma arises from what kinds of sex are acceptable in society. As Tim Dean explains in Mediated Intimacies, HIV-negative women who want to become pregnant but have HIV-positive male partners may choose to go on Truvada to avoid infection. This usage of Truvada is
acceptable because the end goal is “the noble task of heterosexual reproduction” (Dean, 2015, p. 232). However, if an HIV-negative gay man goes on Truvada, he is labeled a ‘Truvada Whore.’ As Rubin says in Thinking Sex, “sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent” (Rubin, 2011/1984, p. 150). The use of medication as a mediator in homosexual erotic enjoyment is unacceptable but the use of it is permissible and understandable in the case of procreative heterosexual intercourse. AIDS foundations in particular have lashed out against the usage of Truvada. Michael Weinstein, president of AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF), refers to Truvada as a “party drug” and that widespread usage will result in “a public health disaster” (Merevick, 2014). Weinstein’s comments, and the subsequent media coverage of them, have effectively built a society that shuns people who ‘don’t need’ Truvada for taking it, despite the fact that in the end it creates a safer society for the LGBT community. The combined effects of the stigma surrounding sexual acts outside of the charmed circle and AHF’s disavowal of Truvada have created a society in which the only way someone can escape judgement is by not admitting that they take Truvada.

Even with the stigma that surrounds their usage of Truvada, members of the queer community who take it regularly have fought back against the discrimination through the reclaiming of language. The term ‘Truvada Whore’ has been reclaimed and now is sold on shirts with the profits going to fund AIDS research. The embrace of the derogatory phrase not only fights against the stigma of taking Truvada but also the stigma of bringing the act of sex for erotic pleasure into the public space. Through the Truvada Whore movement, information from people on Truvada is spreading and disproving some of the myths that surrounded Truvada when the FDA first approved the drug. This use of language empowers not only the group of gay men on Truvada but HIV-negative men who are not on Truvada, as they learn more about the drug from the movement.
Conclusion
Whereas in the pre-Stonewall era the language used in the minority communities within the queer community was primarily geared towards expressing their pain, language in minority communities today is used as a source of empowerment. Language, once used as an expression of isolation and loneliness, is now used as a rallying call, gathering people of like identity and furthering their collective cause.

References
Brooke English is a current sophomore at Rice University pursuing a B.A. in the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality and Cognitive Sciences with a focus in linguistics. She is interested in researching the roots of queer terminology and how that terminology can be used to further social movements. Outside of academics, she is heavily involved in the on-campus Queer Resource Center at Rice and hopes to expand her activism to the greater Houston area and beyond.