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Gale-CLGBTH Non-Residential Fellowship Recipient Makes Sense of a Complex History

As one of five scholars awarded a fellowship from Gale and the Committee on LGBT History in 2022, Jacob Bloomfield’s research project, Tutti Frutti: Little Richard, Sex, Gender, and Transgression in America and Europe, examines how the gender nonconforming African American recording artist Little Richard became one of the most popular musicians in the United States and Europe during the 1950s and pre-“sexual revolution” 1960s. With his research, Bloomfield argues that although observers found Richard appealing because of his flamboyant persona, his status as a queer cultural icon was a complicated one.

All Gale-CLGBTH Non-Residential Fellowship recipients were granted access to Gale’s Archives of Sexuality and Gender and Gale Digital Scholar Lab (the Lab) for a six-month period of research. Archives of Sexuality and Gender is the largest historical collection available in support of gender studies and sexuality, spanning from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Gale Digital Scholar Lab is a cloud-based digital humanities tool that helps researchers tell impactful visual stories with data from Gale’s archives.

Fellows received training on how to use the text and data mining tools available in the Lab to explore Archives of Sexuality and Gender and advance their work using digital humanities methods. Read on to see how Bloomfield used this powerful cloud-based platform to draw on a wide range of primary sources to analyze the historical reception to Richard’s music and image — including in the mainstream American and European press, the Black press, entertainment industry publications, the queer press, and fan magazines.
TROUBLING LITTLE RICHARD’S STATUS AS A QUEER ICON THROUGH ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

In Bloomfield’s estimation, what sets his work apart from other researchers who have studied Little Richard is that most existing scholarship focuses on Richard’s music and personal reflections as a primary source. By contrast, Bloomfield used archival research to concentrate on third-party reception to Richard’s music and persona. A central concern for Bloomfield is understanding Richard’s status as a queer icon — and whether or not he merits such a distinction.

“Posthumous assessments of the singer have argued that Richard, as a gender nonconforming popular figure who hinted at his same-sex desire as early as the 1950s, was a cultural trailblazer who fought oppressive sexual and gender norms,” Bloomfield observes. “My project investigates this aspect of Richard’s cultural impact. Specifically, I want to investigate whether Richard was historically a source of inspiration to queer observers or whether Richard’s status as a queer icon is a more recent phenomenon.”

Regarding his decision to apply for the Gale-CLGBTH Non-Residential Fellowship, Bloomfield explains, “From my past engagement with Gale resources, I knew that Gale would offer a remarkable swath of material that I would never be able to find otherwise, or would only be able to find after a great deal of traveling and effort.”

“I was greatly impressed by the amount of resources available, the kinds of resources Gale offered, and how easy it is to navigate Gale’s databases.”

A GEOGRAPHIC BREADTH OF REPORTING ON LITTLE RICHARD FROM THE 1960S UNTIL THE 2000S

According to Bloomfield, Gale’s Archives of Sexuality and Gender was hugely valuable in advancing his research on Richard. “In particular,” he says, “I found a great set of commentary about Richard written in LGBTQ publications dated between the 1960s and the 2000s.”

The geographic breadth of the documents that Bloomfield encountered was immense. Not only did he find materials from the United States and United Kingdom, he also uncovered publications from the Basque Country, the Netherlands, and Venezuela.

Adds Bloomfield, “The publications also represented various cultural perspectives, such as the queer, Black, lesbian, and trans communities. Some of these publications were mainstream, as far as the queer press is concerned, while others were more niche.”

“The ability to browse historical newspapers and periodicals was the most valuable feature offered by Gale’s Archives of Sexuality and Gender. As gauging reception is a critical part of my research, the Gale Digital Scholar Lab’s tools regarding that were valuable to me.”
As part of Bloomfield’s research, he was able to review hundreds of individual primary sources. In sorting through the wealth of material available to him, he was able to organize his sources with the help of Gale Digital Scholar Lab according to the opinions they espoused.

“Most of the sources I reviewed tended to see Richard as either a source of inspiration to the queer and Black community — or a mockery because the singer, at a few points in his career, claimed to be a so-called ‘ex-gay’ and made bigoted statements about queer people,” Bloomfield shares. "This Fellowship was of great value. I would not have found many of these sources without this Fellowship, or I would have only found many of them after a great deal of traveling and archival searching.”

At the same time, Bloomfield’s research using the Archives of Sexuality and Gender also proved that Richard was being understood as a queer man by observers from the 1960s onward, if not earlier.

“This Gale Fellowship allowed me to prove — conclusively, I believe — that queer commentators and observers have historically had an ambivalent relationship with Little Richard,” shares Bloomfield. “I found that queer, Black figures such as musician Sylvester and author James Baldwin were more likely to be discussed by the queer press compared to Richard. Some straight public figures considered to be queer icons, such as Patti LaBelle, were also covered by the Black, queer press more than Richard.”
Interested in learning more about the CLGBTH?

Find more details about the Committee on LGBT History (CLGBTH), including the society’s initiatives and events, at clgbthistory.org

Discover the possibilities of Gale Digital Scholar Lab at gale.com/digital-scholar-lab

Find more information about Archives of Sexuality and Gender at gale.com/primary-sources/archives-of-sexuality-and-gender

Take a Nuanced Approach to Your Research with Gale’s Digital Humanities Tools

Curious to explore the tools Bloomfield used to unpack a complicated legacy?