

## Guest talk by Sarah Pyke (London)

### **“Gay Books Will Burn”: Operation Tiger, Gay’s the Word bookshop, and Literary Censorship in 1980s Britain**

“Gay Books Will Burn” proclaimed a headline in London freesheet Capital Gay in June 1984, following the second of several raids by HM Customs and Excise on Gay’s the Word bookshop in Marchmont Street, Bloomsbury. Thousands of pounds’ worth of stock was seized, staff homes were searched, and eight of the shop’s directors and its manager were charged with importing indecent or obscene titles. They faced trial at the Old Bailey, the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales, and possible imprisonment. This talk explores the underexamined story of “Operation Tiger”, as the customs raids came to be known, and of the sustained – ultimately successful – campaign mounted by supporters to “Defend Gay’s the Word” in response to this heavy-handed state intervention. Tracing the legal case and precedent that eventually saw all charges dropped, I place Operation Tiger in a longer history of literary censorship, examining the interplay between the state, the (queer) consumer, and the bookselling and publishing industries in Britain. The history of queer censure and survival in Britain is one intimately bound up with reading and material texts, with print and with paper. Indeed, following Operation Tiger, increasingly hostile conditions for LGBTQ+ people in the UK (for example, the introduction of the discriminatory Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988) continued to manifest in anxieties about the reciprocities between queer books and bodies. As related concerns about queer identities, uses of space, and even the ‘corrupting’ influence of books and reading are recirculating in 2020-21, this talk provides an overdue account of Gay’s the Word’s central place in the social, economic and legal histories of queer reading and book use, and asks how attention to these episodes from the 1980s may usefully inform our current moment.

### **Bio**

Sarah Pyke completed her PhD in 2020 at the University of Roehampton, with a thesis that explored how childhood and adolescent reading experiences contribute to queer self-fashioning. Since then, she has worked on the AHRC-funded Living Libraries project, assembling an archive of oral histories from people who use, work in and run the UK’s public libraries, to be preserved by the British Library. She is currently Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, where she is working on an institutional and disciplinary history of ‘book history’ and its relation to ‘English Studies’, and thinking about the legacies, demands and possible futures of the field.

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Registrations will be confirmed and zoom details will be sent out approximately one week ahead of time.

Please refer to Corinna Norrick-Rühl, [cnorrick@uni-muenster.de](mailto:cnorrick@uni-muenster.de), in case of any questions.