

Collage as queer creative health: subverting the legacies of Section 28

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To mark the 20th anniversary of the repeal of Section 28, the ‘Section 28 and Its Afterlives’ project organised a series of creative workshops with LGBTQ+ staff, students, and community members across South West England. These workshops offered a space to reflect on Section 28 and its legacies, engaging with this challenging period of recent LGBTQ+ history in a hands-on, empowering way using collage to create personal, subversive, and emotional responses to a range of historical material. This article reflects on collage as a queer creative health praxis of subversion and resistance that: (1) produces relational encounters, (2) operates in a care-full way, and (3) involves non-linear temporalities and transformations. Collage in this context is a mode of historical enquiry, inviting reflections on the echoes of the past, present, and future; multiple spatialities and temporalities; and the generative, transformative potential of discomfort.

Keywords collage • Section 28 • queer • creative health • methodology

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I arrive loaded with materials, hauling them haphazardly into the room. With help from the project team, I lay out archival reproductions and place creative materials around the table. People arrive, nervous, excited, quiet. As they trickle in, some take a seat or stand, looking at the archival material.

Once we’ve all arrived and settled, we begin the opening talk about the project, ‘Section 28 and Its Afterlives’, explaining the workshop to the participants. Before we begin, I lead a short grounding practice, asking them to attend to their senses and feel more comfortable in the space. I warn them of the homophobic nature of the material and offer alternative activities for anyone who needs them.

People are eager to get going, and the flurry of creative activity begins. Everyone dives into the articles, reading, exchanging comments and

exclamations. Gathering materials, they return to the table and begin cutting and placing words and images. It's an active process as they cut, arrange, pause, re-arrange, add to, and stick. Some remain with the material, choosing to read and reflect rather than make.

Time flies and the conversation ebbs and flows. Some share personal stories: a sudden understanding of why it was so hard to come out at school, journeys with internalised homophobia and transphobia, and lives lost to AIDS. I'm dizzy and full to the brim with stories, emotions, and experiences.

I notice the time and begin bringing the session to a close. I invite everyone to share what they've made. People proudly hold up paper, placards, and cardboard, explaining the significance of the images, words, and, for one person, the careful placement of a pair of scissors taped to the front of their collage.

As the team packs down, some linger, asking questions or continuing their stories. Once we've cleared up, we leave carrying stacks of materials, discussing the next workshop and what we might need. Eventually we part ways. I feel renewed by the participants' energy as the hum of the workshop continues to resonate in my body.

Introduction

Despite the introduction of the 2010 UK Equality Act, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ+) communities experience significant barriers to accessing healthcare and public services due to historical and contemporary discrimination ([Zeeman et al, 2019](#); [Braybrook et al, 2025](#)). Almost one-quarter of LGBT people have witnessed discriminatory remarks by healthcare staff, and 14 per cent have avoided treatment for fear of discrimination ([Stonewall UK, 2018](#)). Among transgender, nonbinary, and gender-diverse populations, mental health challenges are much higher in comparison with cisgender people ([Watkinson et al, 2024](#)). Against this stark backdrop, this article demonstrates how responding creatively to difficult histories of discrimination can support queer health today.

Creative health, or arts and health, has become an important field that employs participatory arts in various settings to improve health outcomes ([APPGAHW, 2017](#); [APPGAHW and NCCH, 2023](#)), and is recognised as a useful way to reduce stigma around health conditions (e.g. dementia, HIV and AIDS) and engage marginalised groups ([Fancourt and Finn, 2019](#)). Yet, creative health has been critiqued for its neoliberal agenda and ideological commitments, which has brought the field close to depoliticised approaches to researching healthcare ([Williams, 2023](#)). The normalisation of participatory art over community art ([Matarasso, 2019](#)), where the former is representative and in the domain of public service and institutions, while the latter entails do-it-yourself cultural resistance and democracy as well as a horizontal approach to decision-making, is evident in contemporary 'art in health' approaches ([Williams, 2023](#)).

This article uses queer approaches to creative health, through the spirit of community art and DIY cultural resistance, as a lens to demonstrate how creative approaches, such as collage, can create spaces for people to engage with difficult histories that have impacted their lives. To illustrate this, we use reflective accounts and feedback from workshop participants from over 12 workshops that took place with the ‘Section 28 and Its Afterlives’¹ project in various locations across Devon and Cornwall since 2023.

Section 28 of the Local Government Act was homophobic legislation introduced by Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1988, in force in England and Wales until 2003.² It prohibited the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality by local authorities, including ‘the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’ (UK Government, 1988). Section 28 rubberstamped an oppressive culture of homophobia and intolerance, but it also inspired bold acts of resistance. The ‘Section 28 and Its Afterlives’ project marked the 20th anniversary of its repeal by documenting its impact in a new oral history archive, raising awareness through a touring exhibition, and hosting creative workshops that enabled LGBTQ+ people to reflect on and engage with the legacies of Section 28 through collage. The workshops invited participants to engage with archival newspaper material from the lead-up to Section 28 in the early to mid-1980s to the debates around its repeal in the early 2000s. A small sample of the collages made in the workshops can be found in [Figure 1](#).

We employ the term ‘queer creative health’ ([Jiang, 2023](#)), using queer as a verb to resist normative creative health approaches that advocate for individualised approaches to care, and instead focus on strategies for resistance and subversion in the present. These strategies transcend individual resilience, as this is not about supporting mental health in a much-criticised sense of individualising and depoliticising problems ([Shwaikh, 2023](#); [Bryant and Aggleton, 2025](#)), but rather recognising structural and political causes of ill-health, equipping people with what they need to survive – satirical subversive witty tools, and each other.

Second, we use queer as an approach that envisions alternative social and political possibilities based on collectivity, advocating for queer spaces that are simultaneously empowering, community-based, processual, and vulnerable ([McCartan and Nash, 2023](#)). These spaces were not ‘safe’ in the traditional sense (as a framework for the

Figure 1: Gallery of collages and placards from participants who took part in creative workshops in 2023–2025



creation of distinct material spaces with rules, regulations, and expectations). Rather they were creative and ‘brave’ spaces (Arao and Clemens, 2013) that emphasised ‘the need for courage rather than the illusion of safety’, and in so doing, allowed participants and facilitators to ‘accomplish learning goals and more accurately reflect the nature of genuine dialogue regarding these challenging and controversial topics’ (2013: 141–2).

To begin the article, we review queer creative health and queer collage to provide a framework for the article. We follow this with a discussion of Section 28 and the importance of the workshops in subverting its legacies, then provide an overview of the approach to the workshops and our data collection methods, before turning our attention to the analysis of the Section 28 creative workshops using the framework of queer creative health.

This article concentrates on community and practice-based *queer creative health*, using work that queers approaches to health and biomedicine (Dolezal et al, 2021), as well as the work of a London-based charity, QueerCircle, and independent scholar and writer, Meg-John Barker. The ‘Queer Creative Health’ report (Jiang, 2023), and its accompanying zine (Barker, 2023), used community and participatory arts to explore experiences of health and wellbeing among QueerCircle’s LGBTQ+ community. A queer approach to health ‘contests normative boundaries of being, refuting dualistic thinking, and proposing ways of capturing the often discounted, disrupted ways of being with a living world’ (Dolezal et al, 2021: 9). In QueerCircle’s work, queer creative health is understood as: (1) relational; (2) care-full; and (3) non-linear (Barker, 2023; Jiang, 2023).

First, and in direct critique of biomedicine, there is ‘a growing awareness of how human beings are inextricably interwoven and interdependent with others – human and non-human; organic and inorganic – and that all life is reliant on these entanglements’ (Dolezal et al, 2021: 7). Second, biomedicine espouses a body that is autonomous and independent, leading to a rhetoric of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. Conceptualising health relationally recognises the interdependency of bodies, their communities, and environments. Wellbeing thus emerges from an interdependent practice of care towards oneself and one’s relations (human and more-than-human).

Finally, non-linearity understands health as a fluctuating state and resists the normative reduction of wellbeing into dichotomous categories (good/bad, happy/sad). Rather it is how we ‘made life liveable’ (2021: 14) – the context-dependent and situated ‘fluctuating process through which we are able to explore and negotiate our identities and relationships with others’ (Jiang, 2023: 23). Non-linearity as a process is well encapsulated through the form and materiality of collage.

Collage (from the French *coller*, to paste or glue) is a medium that has been variously used across qualitative research as a critical-creative method and mode of visual enquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2008). Collage as a method resists and stretches the norms of enquiry, enrolling participants and researchers into embodied, creative, emotional, and multi-sensorial modes of reflection and conceptualisation – resisting the normativity of oral and written communication (Bailey and Woodall-Greene, 2022). Similarly, Vaughan (2005) writes of collage – with its juxtapositions, overlappings, and shifting centres and margins – as a provisional and postcolonial practice that intersects multiple discourses. Halberstam’s (2011) work on collage as a liminal practice references the ways collages honour the spaces in between, refusing to respect the boundaries between dualities – self/other, object/gallery, and copy/original.

While collage has been understood as a ‘high’ art form through the work of wellknown and mostly male artists (e.g. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque), ‘its antecedents remain as categories of folk art, hobbies, and practices that were carried out largely by women’ (2011: 5). Feminist collage or ‘femmage’ and radical feminist photomontage are subversive art forms that use cut-and-paste techniques to critique gender roles, consumer culture, and the objectification of women. Hannah Höch’s work has been widely discussed in the historiographies of collage (Gorman et al, 2024). She is widely considered the foremother of the movement, as she used photomontage and collage to critique societal beauty standards. The work of Linder Sterling (or Linder) emerged from the UK’s punk and post-punk

scene of the 1970s. Linder produced radical feminist photomontage, which critiques past and contemporary gender roles by using everyday images from domestic or fashion magazines, archival material, and pornography ([Liverpool Biennial, 2021](#)).

Collage can be conceived as a ‘queer praxis’ and a medium that forces us to think in non-linear and rhizomatic ways, offering a platform for social justice ([Yuen, 2016](#); [Keehn and Burkholder, 2025](#)). Here, queer is used as a transitive verb, as a process of ‘taking existing fragments of culture and reinterpreting dominant cultural norms to produce queer associations’ ([Fountain, 2026: 90](#)). Here, the method of collaging ‘queer[s] concepts like humour and camp, inversion and reversal, excess and extremes’ ([2026: 90](#)). Collage can thus be used as a creative embodied method of queering – challenging and subverting normativity, holding space for non-duality and outrage, and probing the limits of representation. We argue that collage is an important methodology for queer creative health. Collage is an act of ‘reconfiguring (to stitch, to glue, to bind) as both reparative and therapeutic – it is simultaneously a form of “negative destruction” and “positive production”’ ([Fountain, 2026: 90](#)). There is a dimension of transformation within collage, where its violent process of cutting is also generative – ‘allowing for the creation of queer worldview’ ([2026: 90](#)).

In this article, we demonstrate the power of collage as a method of queering through our experiences with using the medium to respond outrageously to homophobic rhetoric in government and right-wing publications during Section 28. Using materials from the period and repurposing text and image through collage – in ways that they could have done at the time – connected participants to the spirit of activism of grassroots LGBTQ+ organisations, individuals, and celebrities who opposed Section 28. Activists at this time often took the homophobic language of the law and press and subverted it, reclaiming it into something outrageous and angry. Here, we think through what collage does in this context, and show how the workshops provided brave spaces to encounter queer health.

‘Section 28 and Its Afterlives’

Section 28 had profound impacts on a generation of young people – the ‘Section 28 generation’ – across the UK and continues to have legacies to this day. The workshops came from a recognition of its impacts ([Walker and Zmith, 2026](#)). Additionally, Section 28 generated a vast amount of homophobic discourse – as well as a lively protest culture – which meant that material for collaging was, in some ways depressingly, readily available in great quantity.

Section 28 did not emerge from nowhere: it must be understood within a context of growing and highly politicised moral panic around homosexuality, which was cultivated by a right-wing government and the popular press across the 1980s. The sharp rise in homophobia at the time can be linked to the tragedy of the AIDS crisis and the subsequent pejorative discourse relating to gay men. However, the specific trigger for Section 28 was the idea that the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality was taking place in some educational settings, such as Haringey, a Labour-controlled London borough. Right-wing pundits seized on fears that young people at school were accessing books depicting inclusive families, such as Susanne Bösche’s *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin*. In the 1987 General Election, Margaret Thatcher won

re-election on a platform of a return to ‘traditional family values’ – and a refusal to allow young people to be taught, as she put it, that ‘they have an unalienable right to be gay’. When the law was debated in Parliament as Clause 28, it sparked mass demonstrations – including one in Manchester attended by 20,000 people – and spectacular actions by lesbian activists who absented into the House of Lords and invaded the BBC studios while the *Six O’Clock News* was on air (Baker, 2022).

Despite this widespread protest, Section 28 came into force in 1988 in England, Wales, and Scotland. It stated that ‘a local authority shall not – a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; and b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’ (UK Government, 1988). Its intention was to stigmatise and invalidate LGBTQ+ identities and lifestyles, particularly in schools. Teenagers were ‘very impressionable and may just as easily pick up bad habits as good habits’, contended Conservative peer Lord Somers. Section 28, he insisted, was ‘a sound piece of legislation’ that would guide them in the right direction (Hansard, HL Deb, 1 February 1988, volume 492, column 875).

Although the ambiguous wording meant that it was hard to enforce legally, Section 28 enabled existing cultures of homophobia in Britain. In schools, this repressive atmosphere prevented the discussion of LGBTQ+ issues in classrooms, allowed homophobic bullying to go unchallenged, and pushed many LGBTQ+ teachers to hide or deny their identities for fear of losing their jobs (Sanders and Spraggs, 1989; Lee, 2023). The Conservatives had proposed the legislation as a return to ‘family values’, and a blow against the ‘loony left’ and lesbian and gay radical militants. This rhetoric was echoed and amplified by the right-wing press (Baker, 2022).

Although first promised in the 1992 Labour Party manifesto, Section 28 was not repealed until 2003, six years after the election of a Labour government in 1997. Earlier attempts to repeal the legislation were stymied by peers in the House of Lords. In 2000, Baroness Young led a vitriolic campaign against repeal in Scotland; she asserted that there was ‘no moral equivalence between homosexual and heterosexual relationships’, insisting that it was ‘not right’ to ‘say to children that there are alternatives in life which are equally valid’ (Hansard, HL Deb, 7 February 2000, volume 609, column 406). The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007 and Equality Act 2010 provided more workplace protection for LGBT teachers, removing some of the uncertainty and fear fostered by Section 28. But while Stonewall’s School Reports in 2007 and 2017 revealed a significant decrease in homophobic bullying in schools, it remained a significant issue: almost half of LGB pupils and two-thirds of trans pupils reported being bullied because of their identities in 2017 (Bradlow and Jadva, 2017).

Subverting Section 28

The debates around both the imposition of Section 28 and its repeal were dominated by homophobic rhetoric, which, in turn, have shaped its memory. Although recent research has emphasised that there is no singular narrative about this period – it is an intersectional history (Oram, 2025) – some aspects of its impact, particularly on the extended generation of LGBTQ+ people who grew up under the influence of Section 28, were widely shared. The workshops used

engagement with this historical homophobic material to prompt reflection on communal and personal pasts. Participants were invited to reflect on: (1) the experience of living under the legislation; (2) the events (or lack thereof) that took place after its repeal; (3) forms of subversive and outrageous resistance; and (4) contemporary challenges to LGBTQ+ rights in the UK. The project team were motivated to host these workshops to collectively make sense of and use the past, its ‘lessons’ and ‘warnings’, and its strategies and spirit of resistance, to confront rising anti-LGBTQ+ politics in the present.

The workshops allowed members of the Section 28 generation to make sense of the legislation and identify the impact it had on them. Section 28 reinforced and maintained a culture of homophobia in schools, which created an atmosphere of fear of self-censorship among both teachers and pupils. This meant that young LGBTQ+ people growing up and attending schools in the UK during Section 28 were denied representation, information, and support. When Section 28 was eventually repealed in England and Wales in November 2003, it was met with little fanfare. The legislation had become so deeply embedded in ‘common sense’ British culture that by the time it was repealed in 2003, it was almost entirely unreported by UK press, and the culture of silence and stigmatisation in schools was slow to change (Lee, 2023). Notably, the legislation was not replaced with anything reparative or progressive, rather it continued to live on through a lack of meaningful change in many facets of public life.

The workshops used the aesthetic of outrage (both real and staged), anger, and an ironic and tongue-in-cheek sensibility of the political action, activism, and protests of the time that drew media attention (e.g. Kate Charlesworth’s famous ‘Claws’ cartoon from the Pink Paper, 1987, from [Queer Britain Museum, 2023](#)). The artworks produced by workshop participants drew on similar senses of parody, puns, and subversion to rebut homophobic claims in the historical material. But they often also expressed personal anger at the way Section 28 had permeated and shaped their lives, and at the current challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities. Here, Section 28 offered a window through which participants could identify current concerns for the community, with anti-trans sentiment identified as the core challenge in the contemporary moment. The authors wanted the workshops to be a space where different temporalities (past, present, future) could entwine, allowing participants to learn more about the ways queer lives were, and are, shaped by the legislation, and to mimic the subversive – sometimes humorous, often outrageous – methods and forms of protest that occurred in resistance to Section 28.

The creative workshops

We held 12 workshops over the course of two years (autumn 2023 to spring 2025) in LGBTQ+ community spaces, on university campuses, at Pride events, and during queer cultural festivals in South West England. The workshops began as an activity to explore challenging historical material relating to Section 28 in a hands-on and empowering way and developed into core annual offerings at many of the events listed above. Typically, workshops lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Duration of workshops was negotiated between the facilitation team and the space or event where the workshop was taking place. Two-hour workshops provided

more time for reflection and discussion, while 1.5 hours would provide enough time to collage with a period of short reflection at the end.

Approach

The workshops used a community arts approach, which privileges the *process* of art making over psychological or creative outcomes (Ward et al, 2021). The lead author (Chloe) is a member of the queer community and has practice in community art, creative research methodologies, mindfulness, and creative facilitation, which guided the structure of the workshops. Mindful enquiry (as a practice of collective recollection, see Asker, 2024) provided a foundation for the workshop as a ‘contact zone’ (Askins and Pain, 2011) or ‘brave space’ (Arao and Clemens, 2013) – where different and uncomfortable experiences could coalesce and be heard collectively.

Furthermore, the workshops employed an open and flexible structure to allow participants to engage their curiosity. The workshops aimed to be educational, not in the didactic sense, but as a practice of freedom to produce ‘conscientisation’ among participants – a form of critical consciousness informed and inspired by the engaged pedagogy of Paulo Freire and bell hooks (hooks, 1994; Freire, 2000). The facilitators briefly introduced the topic, before inviting participants to dive into the archival and creative materials to learn more. A flexible and exploratory approach meant that participants could ‘transgress those boundaries that would confine each [person] to a route, assembly-line approach to learning’ (hooks, 1994: 13). Instead, participants were encouraged to materially and experientially explore and process the material in a self-guided way that ultimately led them to cutting and disassembling the homophobic material.

Materials

The workshop used various paper-based materials along with scissors, glue, letter stamps, and ink. Paper materials included coloured and patterned paper, magazines, and found vintage scraps, along with the printed newspaper articles and reproductions of the government Act. After an initial run of workshops, Chloe created mini placards, using cardboard boxes and lollipop sticks, for participants to create their own protest signs.

The workshops made use of newspaper headlines and articles retrieved from digitised popular national papers of the time. The ‘Section 28 and Its Afterlives’ team compiled a dossier of over 100 articles from the *Daily Mail*, *Telegraph*, *Times*, and *Sunday Times* between 1983 and 2004. This included, for example, ‘Tales we mustn’t tell our children’ (Dahl, 1984), ‘Save the children from sad, sordid sex lessons’ (Kenny, 1986), and ‘The gay horror show’ (Allen, 2000). Articles were retrieved iteratively using keyword searches, for example ‘Section 28’ and ‘Clause 28’ from national and local digital newspaper archives. Once workshops were underway and participants enquired about certain details or identities, more material was retrieved and added. For example, participants wanted more material on lesbians, as well as imagery and cartoons. Selection of materials was based on the perceived ease of their use. When some materials were not popular with participants – either because they were not easy to use or did not prompt a creative response – they were not reproduced again.

Feedback and analysis

The team gathered feedback from the activities through a Microsoft (MS) Forms survey that invited attendees to answer questions about their experiences during the workshops. Ethics approval from the University of Exeter Faculty of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences Ethics Committee was granted to carry out the impact evaluation. The forms asked attendees to reflect on:

Why did you sign up for this workshop? What were you hoping to get out of it?

What did you get out of it? Did engaging with this historical material change how you think about the politics around LGBTQ+ rights today?

How did participating in the workshop make you feel?

Any other comments, including suggestions for how we could do things differently in future.

The results from the survey were deductively analysed using [Jiang's \(2023\)](#) queer creative health framework as the basis for theming the responses. Analysis took place on MS Excel and copied into Word documents under the associated themes.

Doing queer creative health with collage

Relational

Collage was the relational practice through which we sought to create brave spaces to facilitate learning, conversation, and reflection. The practice of collage was the catalyst for reflective and reflexive engagement with the histories of LGBTQ+ discrimination and resistance in the UK, which provided a space where conversations and intergenerational learning could take place. Consequently, the embodied experiences of collaging prompted and enabled new social relations. Workshops were attended by participants from different social backgrounds and age groups – including people from local LGBTQ+ groups and organisations, as well as queer staff, students, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. This collection of individuals created a vibrant atmosphere, generating a sense of community for queer individuals – something that drew many attendees to the workshop, describing it as ‘a wonderful opportunity to connect with people’ (p 8), ‘make friends in the LGBTQ+ community’ (p 4), and ‘be present in a creative communal queer/trans safe space’ (p 2).

In all the workshops, conversation flowed organically between participants and facilitators. A focus on collage – rather than face-to-face conversation – provided an opportunity to engage in ‘parallel play’, a concept used in the literature on neurodivergence and autism, which involves ‘playing [or doing] in close proximity to others but not interacting with them’ ([Pritchard-Rowe et al, 2024](#): 219). Parallel play offers a gentle and non-confrontational embodied orientation – bodies are seated next to each other; attention and gaze is directed to the tactile activity, rather

than at others. Spatially, this allowed for moments of spontaneous conversation, laughter, and shared vulnerability between participants.

Intergenerational experiences were also shared, compared, and discussed between participants from age ranges of 18–30, 31–45, and 46–55. Those that had grown up and were educated during Section 28 were able to share lived experiences with younger queer participants born after the repeal. These younger participants came to the workshops looking for opportunities to learn: ‘I signed up to this workshop because I never lived through Section 28 but have always felt like I needed to learn more about it’ (p 7). One participant told us that: ‘[I felt] emotional and reflective when hearing the stories of other participants as they explained their own work and the lived experiences that they represented’ (p 9). The workshops provided time creatively ‘doing queer memory’ together – ‘to have some down time in a fraught historical moment among queer people’ (p 1).

The Section 28 workshops were opportunities to engage with queer history at multiple levels and through ‘queer feelings’ (Ahmed, 2014). Participants browsed a range of historic newspaper reproductions, learning more about, and in some cases remembering their experiences of the legislation and its impacts on the lives of LGBTQ+ people in the UK. Visual and embodied practices of selecting images, words, reproductions, and collage materials enabled participants to reflect on historical and contemporaneous experiences. Butler-Kisber (2008) has drawn on the parallels between collage and qualitative enquiry, and the ways in which the practice offers a way to map subjectivity: ‘the spontaneous and intuitive method of collage draws out more complex notions about experience, disrupting and challenging safer, more traditional textual routes, leading to learning that is both personal and significant’ (2008: 12).

One participant who attended an event at a local library spent their time engrossed in the historical material, looking through the different headlines and rhetoric. Their careful exploration led them to realise and better articulate the ways they had been marginalised by mainstream media, impacting their ability to come out as a young person. Moments of insight were common across the participants – particularly those who had lived through the legislation and had been educated during this time – allowing them to realise the social, cultural, and political ways they had been shaped as young people. The invisibility of queer lives in their education at school was made visible, haunting their experiences as queer people growing up in the UK.

Discomfort and the sensation of ‘not fitting’ opened up possibilities – both difficult and exciting – and became the surfaces and boundaries on which new relations, knowledges, inspirations, and presents could be forged (Ahmed, 2014). Collage thus offers a mode of disruption – in this case, through embodied and artistic practice, queer subjects were reworking homophobic rhetoric, making visible how ‘their difference from the ideal script produces disturbances – moments of “non-sinking” – that will require active forms of negotiation in different times and place[s]’ (Ahmed, 2014: 153).

Care-full

We carefully, and purposefully, endeavoured to create a brave and safer space for difficult conversations regarding historical and current discrimination. The inclusion of grounding practices³ at the beginning of the workshop allowed the

attendees and facilitators to settle into the room, while also producing ‘mindful affects’ (Carvalho, 2017) that affected the bodies in the room (albeit differently) – allowing vulnerability and difficulty to be navigated sensitively and carefully by the facilitators and participants. Moreover, we found that the very process of collaging was an activity that slowed and stilled bodies – ‘[Afterwards I felt] calmer. Like my brain had had a break. Like a child (in the best way) mucking around with Pritt Stick’ (p 1), while engaging them in the cathartic and ‘*empowering*’ process of ripping and cutting up homophobic material:

[the workshop] made me feel empowered in the sense that my creativity was given the space to resist homophobia/transphobia/lesbophobia and so on through creating something funny, punny, and artsy out of something hurtful in every sense of the word. (p 2)

The workshops were designed in a shame-sensitive and trauma-informed way, with all activities offered as *invitations*. Engagement with the historical material came with trigger warnings and a clear process of self-consent – asking participants to monitor their energy levels, emotional state, and capacities when engaging with the homophobic material. We provided alternative prompts focusing on queer joy to all participants – many participants switched between engaging with the historical material and more joyful activities (including playful LGBTQ+ stickers). Participants were aware of this need to shift between different activities: ‘taking it in a direction that the group wanted to go in, that is being more thoughtful if people found it difficult to think back to this time, or being more positive if there was a more positive or resilient mood’ (p 7).

In taking this approach, we were attentive to the ways in which shame, sadness, and trauma might surface for individuals. The workshops were intentionally set up as non-judgemental spaces that allowed difference and difficulty to emerge. Participants described experiencing a mixture of emotions during the workshops:

A mix of happy (spending time with good people), angry (nothing has changed), incredulous (can’t believe that people just went fully mask-off and wrote what they wrote), sad (it must have been awful), and kind of calm
(actually making art was really relaxing). (p 5)

For some, the workshop was a space to talk about the silence that had permeated their earlier years: ‘made me feel sad, angry, robbed, and also connected, and somehow relieved [*sic*] to be talking about it’ (p 10). Painful affects were (re)worked and reorientated through collage, the cathartic snipping and cutting opened up bodies to pleasurable affects, allowing bodies to take up more space and bring those into contact who have been kept apart by the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality. Taking scissors to paper was both powerful and pleasurable – snipped words littered surfaces, with participants working to reconfigure these words in deliberate and exact ways, perhaps making them as they should have been. It did not quite produce wellbeing, but rather passion – and in the participants’ words – a feeling of being ‘moved’, and ‘empowered’. Queer creative health, then, is about how encountering others ‘from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others’ (Ahmed, 2014: 165). This reflective

process allowed participants to traverse between different temporalities – identifying themselves within the histories in front of them, and how the afterlives of this history continue to shape the world we live in today.

Non-linear

Familiarity with the type of rhetoric in the historical materials provided allowed attendees to reflect on the historical rhymes and repetitions that are playing out in the contemporary:

It was interesting to see that the exact same narratives, even down to the same language, used around Section 28 and homosexuality, are now used about trans people. Strangely enough, this was empowering and drew on a deep sense of solidarity in these struggles, and despite obvious sadness at the turning of the wheel, also a reinvigorated sense that we can and will win, together. (p 11)

Attendees drew parallels across the rhetoric from the late 80s and 1990s with the current anti-trans culture wars permeating online and offline spaces. In the period that the workshops took place, toxic anti-trans rhetoric ([McLean, 2021](#)) was a daily occurrence on mainstream media, with the then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak repeatedly making transphobic and gender essentialist ‘common sense’ comments (rhetoric that directly echoes with the headlines from the era of Section 28) at the Conservative Party conference in October 2023 ([McKeon, 2023](#)). This was followed by jibes against the mother of the late Brianna Ghey, a 16-year-old girl who was murdered in an anti-trans attack ([Walker, 2024](#)). In April 2025, the UK Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the terms ‘sex’, ‘man’, and ‘woman’ in the Equality Act refer strictly to biological sex. Following this, the new Labour Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, announced his U-turn on trans issues, welcoming the ruling for providing ‘clarity’ on the issue. Starmer later clarified that he does not consider transgender women to be women legally ([McKiernan, 2025](#)).

While the workshops did not explicitly draw on these parallels – as facilitators we did not mention events in the current moment nor supply resources that spoke to this – these tensions, anxieties, fears, and traumas bubbled to the surface, allowing participants to see themselves in the past, refracting the present moment through rhetoric of Section 28:

It’s just made me realise that the rhetoric hasn’t changed, just the target. It was lesbians and gays, now it’s trans people. Which is partly encouraging, because we got rid of Section 28, but also really upsetting that we haven’t progressed. (p 5)

The workshops became spaces for participants to creatively and playfully engage with a difficult moment of history – cutting up homophobic material felt cathartic, as an embodied rejection of these narratives – while also confronting the ways in which participants are affected by current rhetoric and media: ‘[it] enabled me to draw parallels between the period of Section 28 and the anti-trans rhetoric and legal limitations that trans communities are facing today’ (p 9).

Different materials used produced different types of embodied transformations. A4 and A3 paper offered a larger surface area that provided space for participants

to reflect, make connections, and explore more complex ideas – engaging with the nonlinearity of their queer experience. The workshop facilitator created mini placards, which were decorated by the participants. The placards mimicked the subversive and camp responses to Section 28 and LGBT activism but were also symbols of protest and resistance. The medium allowed for expressions of anger, injustice, and pride – enhancing the message and emboldening it (perhaps more so than A4 paper). Creating these placards gave the participants a sense of personal activism – making a political and powerful statement in a quiet way on an ordinary day, a kind of everyday activism (Pottinger, 2017). Moreover, the placards could be produced quickly – participants expressing the push of emotion triggered by reading the historical material. Some participants used the larger expanse of A4 or A3 paper to process their grief, anger, or trauma, before engaging with the placards to communicate this anger through queer joy and pride as a form of resistance.

Participants experienced this transformation in different ways, some describing that their initial anger had transformed into a feeling of empowerment and confidence, while others experienced non-linearity as more conflicting, feeling both anger that echoes are felt today and relief to be sharing their experience.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has used the framework of queer creative health to demonstrate how collage can create queer spaces for learning, dialogue, subversion, resistance, and empowerment. An assemblage of queer bodies, archival and creative materials, queerled locations or events, collaging practices, and a reflexive facilitation praxis cohered at the workshops to create a space of queer creative health. The characteristics of this space of queer creative health have been discussed through Jiang's (2023) framework as relational, care-full, and non-linear. Yet, we argue that queer creative health also entails a sense of transformation, both collective and individual, that can inspire collective resistance.

These spaces were relational in the sense that they facilitated a feeling of belonging in a community through shared histories and the sharing of experiences – even negative ones. The workshops were care-fully facilitated and structured to allow reflection, dialogue, and critical consciousness. This opened up opportunities for participants to explore challenging and sensitive histories of marginalisation and discrimination, allowing them to recognise the ways in which this historical legislation impacted their lives historically and contemporaneously. Through using collage as a collective mode of historical enquiry, participants reflected on the rhymes and rhythms of the past, present, and future, which involve multiple spatialities and temporalities, and harnessed their discomfort, sadness, and rage as a generative, transformative potential.

We propose that spaces of queer creative health also entail collective and individual *transformations*, where a form of critical consciousness develops through noticing and recognising that which has been silenced (either historically or recently). It is the awareness of the habitually unthought, as the process of affirmative ethics, in which we learn how we are affected by what comes near (Ahmed, 2010). Negative affects are not to be overcome, but rather to be processed and learnt from, 'which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as a political as well as life resource' (Ahmed, 2010: 216).

This act of becoming conscious, or learning how we are affected, is a mode of transformation, a political resource, and a form of subversive struggle. Yet, this work requires bodies that are vulnerable or open to the possibility of transformation (as many of our participants were), and an acknowledgement that the effects of these transformations can never be known in advance. There is, therefore, a risk in this type of work, one that can be managed bravely – but not completely safely – through careful and critical facilitation and care-full practices.

We conclude by arguing for the importance of queer creative health spaces, which are significant sites of community and resistance in a political, social, and cultural moment where LGBTQ+ (particularly trans) rights are being eroded and challenged. These spaces will endure (despite institutional recognition or funding, or changes in legislation) through pop-up events at community Pride events and queer festivals across the UK.

Notes

¹ <https://s28afterlives.exeter.ac.uk/>.

² Section 28 was first repealed in Scotland in 2000.

³ This included mindfulness techniques that ask participants to come into the present moment by noticing sensations in their body, as well as the sounds and smells around them in the room.

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CA wrote first and subsequent drafts of the manuscript with comments from CSW, HY, and HB. CA facilitated the workshops; CSW and HY delivered the oral histories and retrieved historical material.

Research ethics statement

The authors of this article sought ethical approval for the impact evaluation from the University of Exeter's Faculty of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, which is where the empirical quotes originate.

Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis. Data from the oral histories and content from the workshops are available on the project website: <https://s28afterlives.exeter.ac.uk/>

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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