

REVIEW

Review of *Queer as Folklore*: reimagining science communication through storytelling and identity

Reviewed Book

Coward, S. (2024).

Queer as Folklore: the Hidden Queer History of Myths and Monsters.

Unbound

Reviewed by

Andrea Bandelli

Abstract

This review of *Queer as Folklore* examines how cultural narratives and queer identity intersect to reshape our understanding of science communication. By analyzing myths, legends, and personal stories, the book illustrates how folklore operates as a form of “data storytelling”, capturing accounts of resilience, identity, and exclusion. It critiques the traditional boundaries between scientific knowledge and cultural storytelling, arguing that stories of figures like witches, vampires, and mermaids contain meaningful lessons about survival and social change. The book demonstrates how adopting a queer lens can expose power imbalances and foster inclusive communication, encouraging deeper public engagement with science.

Keywords

Queer(ing) science communication; Science and technology, art and literature

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The field of science communication is constantly evolving, embracing new formats and voices that challenge traditional approaches to increase relevance and engage broader communities effectively. One particularly notable movement is the “queering” of science communication — a shift that resonates with me on both professional and personal levels. Queering science communication means rethinking who gets to tell stories about science and how those stories are told, broadening the narratives to include diverse lived experiences and cultural perspectives [Kankaria, 2024; Lewenstein, 2024; O’Boyle, 2023; Orthia & Roberson, 2023].

Queer as Folklore is a book that examines how folklore and queer identity intersect, using myths, legends, and personal narratives to show how cultural storytelling shapes our understanding of identity, resilience, and social change. While at first glance this may not seem like a traditional science communication book, I found it an enlightening resource for professionals in the field. It offers a fresh perspective on how cultural storytelling can broaden the horizons of science communication practice and therefore it offers important lessons on how to engage new and diverse audiences.

1 - Folklore as meaning-making and data storytelling

Folklore and science, though often placed at odds, share a common goal: to explain the world around us. From the earliest myths of creation to modern scientific theories, both systems seek to understand natural phenomena, navigate uncertainty, and preserve knowledge. In this light, the tales of shapeshifters, witches, and supernatural beings discussed in *Queer as Folklore* can be viewed as cultural data — records of societal fears, aspirations, and responses to change.

In the chapter *Witch-Hunts*, Coward explores how stories of witches associated with healing practices reflect historical experiences of social exclusion and the marginalization of traditional knowledge. These healers, often women, were feared and punished because their knowledge didn’t fit the beliefs of the time. Coward explains how their healing practices were often criminalized and associated with danger, only to be reinterpreted and validated later by formal science — drawing a direct link to how queer culture also reclaims marginalized narratives of resilience, autonomy, and power. This story serves as a metaphor for how traditional medical knowledge from marginalized communities was excluded but later recognized as valuable.

In *Children of the Night*, the book discusses how vampire myths became metaphors for the HIV/AIDS crisis, showing how marginalized communities navigate stigma, fear, and survival through reclaimed narratives. Coward details how these stories reflected both public hysteria and acts of resistance, portraying vampires as symbols of both victimization and defiance.

Similarly, in *A Twist in the Tail*, Coward elaborates on how myths of mermaids in maritime folklore symbolized ecological warnings and shifts, encoding environmental knowledge long before formal scientific studies could document such changes. These stories often described strange omens and mysterious appearances that warned sailors of environmental dangers, reflecting communal observations passed down through generations. This challenges the notion that only scientific studies and empirical data can document history. Instead, it reminds us that stories have always played a role in sense-making and resilience.

2 • Queering science communication: expanding formats and audiences

Queer as Folklore exemplifies how the queering of science communication is not only about representation but also about expanding the formats and frameworks we use to convey scientific ideas. By reframing marginalized narratives as legitimate ways of knowing — for example, highlighting how the vampire myth became a lens for understanding the stigma and exclusion during public health crises — the book dismantles the binaries of rational versus irrational and scientific versus mythical. This approach resonates with recent initiatives in science communication that blend performance, humor, and advocacy to engage new audiences.

Mainstream media are increasingly using these formats — Netflix’s *Don’t Look up* is just one example [Little, 2022] — but staying in the queer movement we find ever more compelling initiatives such as the rise of environmental drag queen Pattie Gonia, who uses performance art to advocate for climate justice.

By focusing on queer experiences and explaining how these narratives challenge dominant perspectives, *Queer as Folklore* highlights how power dynamics, identity, and cultural resilience shape how knowledge is produced and shared. Folklore, often created by and for communities pushed to the margins, offers rich narratives of survival and adaptation that resonate with universal human experiences. In this way, the book’s approach underscores that everyone — not just queer communities — can benefit from broader, more inclusive forms of science communication.

3 • Folklore as a bridge between science and culture

The use of folklore as a bridge between scientific knowledge and cultural experience invites us to rethink how science communicators engage with their audiences. Folklore’s emotive, imaginative storytelling fosters a sense of belonging and connection that facts and figures alone often cannot. Stories of fairies, witches, and sea monsters are not just escapist tales; they are records of humanity’s attempts to understand natural disasters, illness, and social upheaval.

The book’s exploration of these narratives is particularly relevant in the context of public health and environmental science. Myths — such as those about witches and mermaids — highlight how traditional knowledge systems were marginalized and later recognized for their value. The book also notes that many of those who told and preserved these stories were themselves marginalized and confined to subcultures, adding another layer of resilience and adaptation to these narratives. By connecting these examples to larger themes of resilience, caution, and community wisdom, Coward’s work bridges individual stories with a deeper understanding of how cultural narratives shape our responses to uncertainty.

We also see echoes of this in how marginalized voices in science continue to be overlooked, as documented in projects like *The Queer Variable* [Carpinetti & O’Boyle, 2022], which amplifies the stories of LGBTQ+ scientists navigating STEM fields. These connections remind us that inclusive storytelling in science communication can challenge power imbalances, foster curiosity, and inspire action.

4 - The queer lens: revealing power, resilience, and identity

A key strength of *Queer as Folklore* is its ability to use a queer lens to reveal the complexities of resilience, identity, and power within cultural narratives. Queer storytelling disrupts dominant histories, making space for alternative ways of understanding the world and ourselves. In science communication, this lens can expose the hidden power structures that determine whose stories and knowledge are valued.

By presenting myths and legends not as relics of the past but as active, living narratives that can be reinterpreted for contemporary contexts, *Queer as Folklore* offers a model for how science communicators can engage with stories to make science relevant and inclusive today. This approach invites communicators to see folklore not as outdated superstition but as a vibrant tool for fostering curiosity and deepening our collective understanding of reality.

5 - Conclusion: folklore as a compass for science communication

Ultimately, *Queer as Folklore* to me is not just a book about folklore; it is an invitation to rethink how we tell stories about the world and, in doing so, how we communicate science. By embracing narrative hybridity — combining empirical knowledge with cultural storytelling — science communication can become more inclusive, imaginative, and impactful.

Queer as Folklore reminds us that, much like science, stories are not static. They adapt, evolve, and help us make sense of an ever-changing world. For science communicators, this book is a compelling reminder that storytelling remains one of the most powerful tools we have to inspire curiosity, connection, and resilience.

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