

Queer Identities

Rupturing Identity Categories and Negotiating Meanings of Queer

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Ce projet décrit sept Canadiennes qui s'approprient le terme "queer" comme orientation sexuelle et en explore les différentes significations. Leur identité et expériences pointent à certaines catégories sexuelles existantes comme lesbiennes et hétérosexuelles.

In the 1990s, the term "queer" gained new acceptance within poststructuralist/postmodernist thought. In part, this was an attempt to move away from reproducing the heterosexist binary of heterosexual and homosexual. Queer theory contends that in order to challenge heteronormativity, we need to go beyond replacing one restrictive category with another. To illustrate, queer theorists argue that in challenging heterosexuality with homosexuality, we are replacing one inadequate category with another similarly inadequate category. The perceived inadequacy of these categories stems largely from their application as fixed identities. Queer theory offers an alternative conception where sexuality and gender are fluid and unstable categories. Queer allows for a complex and changing identity, where people locate themselves in different places at different times. It is seen as a category that can change the *form* of sexuality, rather than just the content. Queer, in this context, is also used as a verb, *to queer*. To queer is to seek to trouble, undo or unfix categories.

In the article, "The Politics of Inside/Out," Ki Namaste recommends that queer theoreticians pay attention to the diversity of non-heterosexual identities. I created the following research project through my interest in queer theory and a subsequent recognition that queer, as described in queer theory, is an excellent description for my sexuality and gender practices. Since queer is a term that resists a static definition, I was curious to see who else was claiming queer as an identity category and what it meant for them. After sending an email to friends and various listservs detailing my interest in starting an academic study of queer identities, I heard from seven queer women from across Canada who were willing to let me study their notions of being queer.¹ As we were far apart geographically, I set up an Internet listserv where we could discuss our reasons for claiming queer, and collectively debate the differing meanings ascribed to this shifting category.² Experience is central to this project, as I examine my own experiences and those of the other participants as my source of "data." I do not view stories about experience as offering the "truth" about queer identities unproblematically. Rather, I view these experiences as constructed by the discourses that are available to us, just as we are

constructed by available discourses (Foucault). Below, I describe some of the meanings participants ascribed to queer, and explore the ways in which queer was understood and represented by people who claim, or have claimed, queer as their sexuality identity category.

The first person to email the listserv identified herself as "Stressed!" Stressed wrote often about trying to finish her graduate-level thesis, and chose her alias to reflect her current state of mind. She related how her claiming of queer as an identity category came through her coming-out process and her reluctance to choose a sexuality category that seemed to "fix" her changing identity. She found that in coming out, queer seemed "to roll off [her] tongue more easily than lesbian or bisexual." She explained that she rejected the term lesbian in order to avoid "a discussion of the mechanics of [her] brain." For her, queer seeks to de-essentialize sexuality and marks it as a shifting identity. Stressed invoked queer as an identity category first in opposition to heterosexuality during her coming-out process, and then in opposition to other non-normative sexuality categories. On the listserv, queer was frequently defined in opposition to "normal" (heteronormativity) when the participants realised that

they themselves were no longer considered to be “normal” sexually. However, it is important to note that queer was also frequently referenced in opposition to other non-normative sexuality identity categories such as lesbian or bisexual. Stressed focused on the limits of “LGB” identity categories as they didn’t quite “seem to fit.”³ Stressed’s queer identity was claimed as a preferred alternative to all other sexuality categories, normative and non-normative.

Stressed was planning to start a teaching position in the upcoming fall, and in her last message to the listserv she expressed her concern about the need to overhaul the educational system. She wrote that because such an overhaul was unlikely, she planned to try “queering it from within.” She would queer the existing educational system by seeking out

either current educational initiatives or programs outside of the ed system that actually take into account social exclusion/inclusion that actually acknowledges racist, sexist, colonialist, heterosexist pedagogies and systems....

She described this queering of the system as her “utopian vision.” Although her articulation of queer was mostly related to personal identity, she named “queering” as part of an educational project concerned with racism, sexism, colonialism, and heterosexism. Here we can see queer as a way to think (theory) and a way to act politically. In the conversations on the listserv, there was often an assumed leap between “queer is the category that I am most comfortable with” and “queer is a term that has political potential to be disruptive and challenging.” Stressed demonstrated this when she moved from using queer as a category she claims, to using queer as a verb—“to queer” the educational system. This slide between identity and politics suggests that

for some people, queer is seen as a term that is directly connected to larger political projects.

The next participant who joined the listserv claimed her name from a goofy and likeable teenage boy character from the Canadian teen television show *Degrassi Junior High*. In her first email to the listserv, “Joey Jeremiah” explained that she had first heard of the term

“i am queer because it is the easiest way for other people to understand me. Sometimes, i think i would feel comfortable in simply telling people that i like girls ... oh, and i guess i am dressed like a boy today.”

queer about two years previous. She described how she had spent most of her life “being queer” and that it was through the process of coming out to friends and family that she realized that her desires were associated with a whole new (lesbian) identity for everyone else. She explained that she was not comfortable with the term lesbian, but went with it because it seemed to help her friends and family make sense of her new sexual relations with women. Joey Jeremiah explained that she has come to prefer queer as an identity marker because she believed that it fits with her sexuality and gender practices. As she explained,

i have to say that i think that i am queer because it is the easiest way for other people to understand me.

Sometimes, i think i would feel comfortable in simply telling people that i like girls ... oh, and i guess i am dressed like a boy today.

She described her life-long queerness in this way:

I would daydream for hours about being the boy who brought the girl flowers, the boy who got to hold a girl’s hand, the girl who was seduced by other girls (occasionally Madonna), the girl who was seduced by a boy in my school, and the person who made my two school male crushes kiss.... I fantasize about being a man, a sleek dark-haired boy. I love it when my female partner calls me “girly.” I wear make-up. I get along well with guys and get nervous around women. I love cars—I would love to be a tough mechanic boy.

In explaining her queerness, Joey Jeremiah described a series of sexual and gender “roles,” and seems to see the category lesbian as precluding some of them. She chose the category queer over the category lesbian because she saw queer as allowing her desire for women, her desire to play man to the woman, her desire for men, her desire for queer men, and her desire to be the man to another man. She explained that she feels that this term “allows other people to understand something about [her] (if someone dares to ask).” Her assertions that the category queer helps other people to understand her non-normative sexuality and gender performance, suggest that queer “explains” or encapsulates sexuality and gender. It also suggests that queer is a category that people recognize and can use to order and make sense of these non-normative identifications.

Joey Jeremiah claimed queer as an identity category while keeping queer theory at an arm’s length. She writes, “i think that i have been a living breathing queer since i have known myself... without any theory to denounce ‘hetero-nor-

mative practices' to inspire me or for me to refer to." Queer theory is not an authority for Joey Jeremiah and she seemed to invert/subvert the statement "I am queer" by writing "queer is me." She reiterated that queer is an identity marker that she chooses for herself because it helps *others* to understand her sexual practices and gender performances. Joey Jeremiah

"i was a trans-gendered five-year-old. i remember clearly wishing to be a boy so that i could like girls, and even after i learned that i was a plain old pervert, i still felt tossed about by gender."

did not need or want "theory" to explain who or what she is.

Piglet logged in only once to put her thoughts on the listserv. She explained that about eight years ago, before she "came out as a dyke," she spent some time reflecting on the word queer. Prior to coming out, she felt that claiming queer as a personal identity allowed her to work against homophobia and be seen as an ally, while not yet claiming a fixed non-normative sexuality. She wrote that she

had been searching for ways to be less "in the box" all the time and for words, phrases, and cultures that had embedded in them a sense of the impossibility of capturing and fixing meaning. Queer seemed to fit the bill.

She explained:

I liked the sense that I could work against homophobia and be seen as an ally—a strong enough ally that I could be a "part" of things... maybe even claim the same name and bits of identity. I don't mean to say that I thought that I was homosexual and could then "really-know-what-it's-like" to suffer the effects of homophobia. Rather, because of my attitude and practices around issues of homosexuality and homophobia that, well, I could claim some sense of queerness and maybe wouldn't have to prove myself over and over again.

She explained that about five years ago, she "came out as a dyke" and since then she hasn't spent nearly as much time thinking about queer and what it means. With Piglet, it seems that queer offered room for her, as a straight ally, to claim space as a "legitimate" ally working against homophobia. Her claiming of queer related to her positive attitude toward "homosexuality" and her interest in working against homophobia. Her story suggests that she was not seen as a part of things because she was not lesbian or bisexual and therefore had to "prove herself" in order to be accepted into the communities of resistance that work against homophobia. Piglet later chose to change her identity marker to the more stable identity dyke, when she came out. It is possible that in this case, queer may have been regarded in much the same way as bisexual often is, as a flexible/unstable conduit for questioning before claiming a fixed/stable gay or lesbian identity marker.⁴

Sheila was the next participant to join the listserv and she started off her entries by relating to Joey Jeremiah's comments about being "a boy with tits and a vagina." Sheila explained that she is frequently read as a male and consequently other women will direct her to the "cor-

rect" (men's) washroom or give her strange looks. With this information in mind, Sheila ironically chose her alias with the following explanation, "Sheila—(my alias, for although it's also the one on my driver's license, i sure didn't pick it)." Sheila "came out" and claimed lesbian as her identity marker because she was "too afraid of the implications of any other words." Two years later she claimed dyke and later queer. She explained this by writing, "i adopted dyke and a bit later queer, as terms of my own making, and as terms constantly being remade by those who adopt them." Sheila explained that after claiming lesbian, she still felt "tossed about by gender." She explained in more detail:

so like joey, i feel like queer has been a way of experiencing the world long before the theory came whacking me in the head with a good old so that's what's going on here! in fact i was a trans-gendered five-year-old. i remember clearly wishing to be a boy so that i could like girls, and even after i learned that i was a plain old pervert, i still felt tossed about by gender.

For Sheila, queer seemed to be a coming together of non-normative sexuality and gender performance, while lesbian apparently captured only her non-normative sexuality. She was interested in upsetting the assumed stability of the terms heterosexual, dyke, lesbian, gay, or straight. Over the course of many postings it became clear that for Sheila, queer reflected her sexuality, gender and a way to act politically through challenging notions of sex/gender essentialism and fixed sexuality categories.

Michelle was the next person to enter the listserv discussion. She explained that she describes herself as bi and queer. Michelle was heterosexually married and sometimes jokingly referred to herself as a married lesbian, because, as she

wrote, "I'm quite satisfied with my marriage so I haven't wanted another man in my life but I crave being with women and that is the only 'extramarital' sex I want." Michelle plays in the realm of BDSM (bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism) and explains that she is queer for loving sex and relationships with other women, for her polyamorous leanings and for enjoying "unusual" sex practices. Michelle described queer as:

a simple thing: If you're not straight you're queer. That means if you're not a dyed-in-the-wool heterosexual you qualify. Act now! <grin> Seriously, if you're a lesbian, or gay, bisexual, asexual, omnisexual, transsexual, or whatever and/or identify as polyamorous or even if you prefer sex only solo, I say you qualify.

In contrast to earlier participants who defined queer in opposition to heterosexuality and homosexuality, Michelle defined queer strictly in opposition to heterosexuality. For Michelle, queer related to sexual open-mindedness, transsexuals, and non-normative sexual practices such as polyamory and BDSM. Her self-definition as queer challenges conventional ideas of what it means to be a married heterosexual, as well as contesting the negative connotations often assigned to so-called heterosexual "tourists" within gay and lesbian communities.

Beaker was the next contributor to the listserv and she explained that although she is not a huge fan of labels, she uses the term queer to describe herself. She offered this explanation:

Like other people have said, for me queer just seems to fit. It's a headspace. Most days I don't like labels at all and other days I am inclined to check all of the above: "asexual grrrl bi baby dyke queer lezzie boy gender pirate." In a

sense, I understand/use queer to be expansive and it can be about finding pride in not fitting and exposing the restrictions imposed on people by the hetero norm.

It is interesting that it is possible for Beaker to be averse to labels and then label herself as queer. Beaker specifies the "expansive" nature of queer allows her to be all categories, but is also a category from which she can critique the hetero norm. Here, the discourse of queer can be simultaneously a useful label, while signalling an anti-label stance.

Beaker was wary of queer being used as a term to hide behind in order to evade recognizing privilege through the claiming of a marginalized identity. Beaker wrote in her introduction of herself,

being queer doesn't erase race or class privilege or negate the ways I am implicated in systems of oppression, but it does make me want to work harder to identify and call myself on these things, to expect criticism, to change, and to work more broadly towards an inclusive world.

Here we can see queer as a space in which privilege must be acknowledged and individuals are called to be accountable for the ways in which we are implicated in systems of domination. Such politics were held by Beaker in opposition to gay and lesbian identity politics where race, class and disability are sometimes viewed as distractions from the "real issue" of sexuality. Queer seems to be, in theory at least, an attempt to move away from viewing identities as always separate and singular issues, and being critical of the way in which gay and lesbian issues have been asserted via representations of gays and lesbians as White, middle-class, able(d) bodied people.

Beaker addressed the tension between performing a recognizably

non-normative sexuality identity and performing the instability of queer. She related an incident when a lesbian co-worker asked Beaker if she was gay. The woman explained that her gaydar was usually good, but she couldn't quite peg Beaker. Beaker responded by saying, "I'm queer and one of the reasons is because I don't want to be pegged." Beaker pondered whether she was somehow

not performing up to par ... because it wasn't "obvious" to her that I was not straight... Like there is some essential queerness that I have failed to exude. This of course rings to me as total crap, but still it was my reaction.

Beaker pointed to a tension between refusing an identification that confines and being preoccupied with getting queer performance "right." This points to the difficulty of presenting/performing an unstable sexuality and gender identity, and the desire to still be recognized as having a non-normative sexuality and gender identity. I locate this tension within the context of heteronormativity, where people tend to be presumed to be heterosexual unless they prove, or

"In as sense, I understand/use queer to be expansive and it can be about finding pride in not fitting and exposing the restrictions imposed on people by the hetero norm."

are proven, otherwise. This facilitates a need for people to demonstrate that they are not heterosexual. Around this need has sprung up a host of codes that are thought to signal a non-normative, often gay or lesbian, sexuality. Beaker pointed out that while this effort of performing the “other” disrupts the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, it also does not disrupt the “otherness” of those with non-normative sexualities. The “others” are still given the responsibility of distinguishing themselves while society is allowed to continue on with the practice of heterosexism. In this sense, there is a tension between discourses that say everyone is straight except for deviants/“others”; the lesbian and gay discourses that seek to disrupt the presumption of heterosexuality and shame of homosexuality through claiming a positive homosexual identity; and the discourse of queer that seeks to disrupt the presumption *and* centrality of heterosexuality while refusing the confines of identification. Beaker’s comments suggested that she was actively negotiating these tensions.

Pixie was the last participant to join the listserv; due to problems with her email account she had difficulties posting and in the end, we completely lost contact. Like Michelle, Pixie identified as bi and queer. She found that queer was the best category for her sexuality, which she described as,

a dyke that likes to fuck men every so often, a woman who is happy being a woman but who likes to play around with gender roles a lot. Don't even get me started on how being into leather would be perceived here....

She is referring here to her recent move from a large city to a small island community on the west coast of Canada. She attended a group there “for gays and lesbians” assuming that this was just an “old fash-

ioned turn of phrase” and expected that such a group would be open to bi, trans and queer people. When she attended, she was advised that the group doesn’t like the term queer and was uncomfortable around bi and trans people. She explained that while she finds queer to be the best descriptor for her sexuality, it is not one that is accepted in the rural gay and lesbian community that she was currently residing in. Pixie uses queer as an identity marker because she has a non-normative sexual orientation and enjoys playing with gender roles and leather. From her description, she seemed to define her queerness (on the listserv) in opposition to, what she called, “middle of the road”/“straight” gay and lesbian people.

Pixie introduced the social conditions of possibility for queer to become a part of the way she could be recognized in daily life. Within the designated “gay and lesbian” space, Pixie’s queer sexuality was not recognized and she was viewed as “other” within that context. Her identity made the gay and lesbian participants of the group uncomfortable and/or afraid and thus she was pressured to conform or be quiet. She wrote, “‘queer’ is the best definition for my sexuality I have found but I’ve found it’s not accepted outside of the city.” Pixie’s story spoke to the limits of tolerance within this particular gay and lesbian community. Her queer identity was accepted in a larger urban setting, but was unacceptable in her new rural setting.⁵ Within this particular “gay and lesbian” group, queer was “off the scale” and did not measure in the discourses around gay and lesbian except as the contingent and scary “other.” Pixie demonstrated the difficulty of asserting an identity that encompassed more than that which is acceptably discussed. That is to say that if gender constructions are not challenged, for example, within this gay and lesbian

community, it becomes a difficult subject to broach. As well, we can see some contestation in meaning here as queer shifts from having a positive connotation for Pixie, to having a negative connotation for the gay and lesbian group she came into contact with.

My research demonstrates that some people are starting to choose queer as a sexuality category as an alternative to claiming heterosexual, gay, lesbian and bisexual identities. While each participant offered a unique representation of their queer identity, some of these queer-identified individuals viewed queer identity as more inclusive of non-normative gender performances. Some saw queer as a movement that tries to recognize differences of race, class, gender, and ability among queers and work toward equity in each of these areas; trying to be more accountable for points of privilege, rather than focused solely on marginality. Others saw queer as reflecting people who participate in BDSM, leather and polyamory; and for all, queer as an identity marker was simply a better fit for their experience of their sexualities, gender performances, and political leanings. From the information on the listserv queer can mean/be: something you are; something you call yourself; something you do; a way to think (theory); and a way to act—sexually and politically. All of these were explanations that were invoked at different times, by different participants.

This research points to the openness that the category queer affords women with non-normative sexualities, gender performances and sexual practices. Their identifications and experiences serve to complicate and point to the perceived limits of gay, lesbian and heterosexual identities. Ideally, these stories of shifting identifications and intersecting political goals will inform the work of those who organize around issues of sexuality. As

queer enters the mainstream it will be interesting to see how this categorical openness plays out in relation to other identity categories and projects relating to sexual liberation.

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¹While I did not set out to study

queer women, it was people who identified as women who responded to my initial email.

²Participants all signed letters of consent that allows me to publish anything from the listserv.

³Bisexual held a contested place for many people on the listserv. It was often claimed in conjunction with queer, as in a "bi-queer" identity, while others, such as Stressed viewed the term "bi-sexual" as implying two biological sexes which was seen as excluding trans-identified people.

⁴In the case of bisexuality, this is an unfortunate belief as bisexuality is often viewed as a state of experimentation or flux, rather than as a legiti-

mate and lifelong sexuality.

⁵Of course this is not meant to be a generalizable study, however, it was through Pixie's contribution that we realized everyone on the listserv was located in major cities across Canada.

References

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CORNELIA C. HORNSTY

Salesman with Flowers

Frank is a creep, Sue said under her breath and in her dreams and to Dan her partner, who understood, but it didn't help that he got the picture, because Frank reminded her of all the buffoons she went to high school with and she hadn't seen any of those guys for over forty years. But she imagined what they would look like, what they would act like, slobbering in their beer, making snide remarks about Sally's tits. Boy wouldn't you like to get next to those ha, ha, ha. But this Frank was the father of Brent, a mild-mannered young man of thirty who had become a friend of theirs, spending many an evening in heated discussions about politics, philosophy, ethics, whatever, over pizza and beer. One day Brent's father and mother took everyone to lunch at the Crystal Gardens restaurant where after a number of drinks Frank pontificated about how nice Dan and Sue were and how much they had done for his son, helping him to finish his degree and all, while Brent sat there and was ignored, and didn't know he was ignored, but he was, and Dan and Sue couldn't believe it, and why didn't he notice that he wasn't there? Then Frank told them about taking his son to a strip joint a couple of days before Brent got married and how much fun it had been, and boy, those wonderful lap dancers were great, weren't they Brent? Then Frank started to talk about the strippers and how he respected those ladies and thought really well of them. Lydia his wife sat there gazing at the huge exotic flowers that filled the restaurant, a slight smile on her face and ribbons in her hair.

Cornelia C. Hornosty's poetry appears earlier in this volume.