

Why *Queer*?

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“Queer” is a word we all know, but few of us use it. “Queer” is a word with life. You can’t hear it without an emotional—even *visceral*—response. The word *does* something to you. It *acts* upon you.

If you were the kid in the middle school hallways who felt the force of the word through the velocity of a bully’s blows, hearing it may still cause your stomach to churn. “Queer” means blood and bruises and tears and fear. Maybe you’ve had enough of hearing it.

If you were the bully whose lips became practiced at forming the word whenever you stood within shouting distance of those “little queers,” it means something different. It may mean shame and regret for the vitriol you spewed forth in torment of your peers. You may wish you could just forget the word altogether, to disavow its place in the lexicon of the vernacular.

Some have neither of these associations, but still find the word unbecoming. It’s just not a “nice” word, too undignified for respectable conversation, sullied by questionable associations.

Sometimes “queer” is used as simple shorthand, cutting down on the cumbersome acronyms of the sexual/gender alphabet soup (e.g., LGBTTQQIAA – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally...more could be added).¹ Queer becomes a term of unification, bringing together everyone experiencing injustice and violence based on their sexuality or gender identity beneath one tiny term. But its power transcends that of mere linguistic convenience.

Queer is a word of *remembrance*. Like many terms of derision employed as rhetorical weapons against minority groups, “queer” continually takes on new life. Because we (queers) can’t let you forget. And we, too, must be prompted to remember.

When *we* use the term—that is, when spoken by those of us who identify as somehow *queer* in our sexuality or gender identity—we are claiming a term once (and often still) used to enact violence against us, and reappropriating it as a term of unity and defiant pride. It is a movement of strength and resolve that says, “We won’t let you forever own this word as a term of contempt.”

But it is also a rhetorical trick we play so that none may forget. Forgetting is too easy an escape. Even as a reappropriated term of pride, “queer” forces all to *remember* its cruel etymological past. It says something about who we think we are and aspire to become. And, in the same breath, what we’ve seen, what we’ve experienced, what we’ve done and what’s been done to us, and what we refuse to allow any longer.

Queer is a word of *resistance*. Even as it is employed as a shorthand term of wide *inclusion*, queer calls our attention to the limitation on our linguistic capacity to define others. Queer stands in resistance to our definitional capacity and our presumed power to name and know “others.” It challenges the binary terms we use to categorize human being and experience with words like straight/gay and male/female. Where our medical, psychiatric and religious ways of speaking about gender and sexuality provide us with these linguistic categories and attach to them valuations of the healthy/unhealthy, normal/pathological, holy/profane—“queer” stands in disruption. Queer scholarship disrupts the seeming “naturalness” of our categorizations by lifting the veil on their histories and it disturbs their supposed “innocence” by implicating their attachments to power—the power to define what is true, real, and good in life and experience.²

While I use the word “queer” as a term of inclusion to encompass persons who live against the grain of heterosexual norms and biological gender conformity—people we might

refer to with terms like “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” “sexually questioning,” “intersex,” “asexual,” etc.—I also hope you will feel the word packing a little more punch than a simple term of all-encompassing convenience.

Even when used as a term of unification for numerous sexual and gender identifications, queer must simultaneously represent a resistance to the erasure of these diverse identifications—as if one word could encompass the rich differences that shape our lives. Rather than a simple unity of identifiers, queer represents the multiplicity of each individual’s *identities*. Rather than a static understanding of our sense of self, queer should remind us of the continued flux of identities in which each of us lives. Rather than *an* identity, queer should remind us of the complexity of all of our identities, claiming that there is more to our sense of identity than can be captured by either the terms of identification applied *to us* and those that are self-chosen *by us*.

“Queer” should disturb us, shake us up a bit, skew our perception. Just when you think you’ve “got it,” experience the queer trickery being played upon your conceptual grasp causing you to return to the questions you once felt sure you had answered. Queer calls us to question commonsensical knowledge and perspectives, to form, *reform*, and *deform* our knowledge of sexual and gender difference.

Queer is a word of unification of those targeted by prejudice and injustice. It is a word of remembrance spoken to those who wish to forget the word and all of the lives it has marked. Queer is a term of resistance to the easy ways we categorize others based upon our perceptions of human difference. And queer is a word of invitation to move beyond—beyond practices of division and devaluation of human life, beyond overly simple categories for understanding human difference, and beyond the limited set of questions that we are typically found asking about queer lives.

¹ Readers encountering the diversity of terminology surrounding sexuality and gender identity for the first time might benefit from a further brief explanation of a few of these terms. While “**sexual orientation**” refers to one’s primary attractions and desires for physical, sexual, spiritual, or emotional intimacy, “**gender identity**” is used in reference to one’s social, psychological, spiritual, and behavioral experience and expression of “**gender**” as male or female, both, neither, or those for whom gender is experienced in a more fluid state not captured by the male/female binary.

With regard to sexual orientation, while this term, “**homosexual**,” was once commonly in use among those affirming of gays and lesbians, today this term is typically heard with a cold, clinical ring and is used most widely among those holding a *non-affirming* stance in relation to same-sex attracted persons. Presently, it is rarely used as a term of *self-description* among gays and lesbians. Today, it is far more common to hear men whose emotional, physical and sexual attraction is toward other men referred to as “**gay**,” women attracted to women referred to as “**lesbian**,” and men and women who experience attraction to both men and women referred to as “**bisexual**.” In many African American contexts, the term “**same-gender-loving**” (SGL) is preferred to the terms “gay,” “lesbian,” or “queer.”

The term, “**transgender**,” is used in reference to persons whose own psychological and spiritual sense of gender differs from the social and cultural expectations attached to the biological/physical sex characteristics with which they were born. “**Transsexual**” is often used to refer to those who experience a desire to change bodily characteristic through surgical or hormonal treatments in order to achieve a closer match between bodily appearance and psychological/spiritual gender identity. “**Intersex**” is a term used to denote persons whose physical, hormonal, or chromosomal sex characteristics at birth do not fit neatly into the categories of either male or female. And, finally, “**gender queer**” is sometimes used by those whose internal sense and external expression of gender transgresses binary categorizations like male and female.

The acronym **LGBT** or **LGBTQ** is commonly used to denote “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning” people.

² This is usage of “queer” most akin to that employed in “queer theory” and “queer theology.” For further exploration of these fields of inquiry, see Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1996).