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To Be Queer

by Trevor Hoppe

Queer is the color of our world. It is indeed a lens through which we understand our lives and the lives of those who surround us. It flavors our experiences with shades and hues that only we can understand. Our history is erased. Our future is unknown. To describe how it is to be queer would be to describe what it is to be human. It is within. It is obscured.

I often say that I knew that I was queer when I felt the blunt edge of rock hit my head at the acne age of 12. "Faggot." The rock did not come alone – its accomplices were six letters meant to remind me of my place. They instilled in me the knowledge that queer was other. Deviant. Lesser.

Queer, to the average American, is illustrated singularly as an experience contained by whiteness. By maleness. We are only accepted into the mainstream if we are gutted of all threat – reduced to flat characters on sitcoms that lack substance. If our bodies are non-sexual bodies, then they are welcomed into primetime television. Our deviance must be restrained for our presence to be invited.

And yet the queer experience is not one. It is not evenly distributed in neat packages. There is no costume to be worn that expresses all of our collective experiences. Within our otherness we are varied. We come in many shapes and sizes and our experiences refuse to be contained by such painfully plain nomenclature. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender – they are all too monotone to explain our complexities. Implicit in them is an understanding of sexuality that cannot account for the full range of our experiences. What does it mean that so many of us fall outside the boundaries of these categories?

Understanding these boundaries is no easy feat. Our identities are not shaped in a vacuum independent of others. While I have a part in the process of shaping who I am (and, who I'm not), so do they. Being queer and male isn't just about fucking men, after all. Just as being a lesbian isn't just about fucking women. It's much more titillating than that. Having "faggot" yelled at me does not somehow mean that the angry young man across the street has been divinely informed about my sexual escapades. Other cues tip him off. It is the texture of my voice; the complexion of my clothes;



Aurélie by Brice McGowen

the very fragrance of my being that has wondered in his direction. At the locus of all of these beautiful qualities lays the "me" that strangers get to know.

How do they know so much about me? How is it that people who have never heard the six letters of my name can come to such finite conclusions about who I am? It is because there is a we to which I belong that they can make sense of me. If queer held meaning that only I understood, then the young man across the street's suspicions would never have been piqued. Identity is meaningless without community; and it is within our community of the oppressed that we have developed what, platonically, it means to be queer. We develop codes to define ourselves against the mainstream – codes whose ciphers are constantly being negotiated to meet the needs of our ever-morphing selves. Being queer in America in 1970 is not the same as being queer in America in 2005. Our history is material to understanding why queer looks and smells the way it does today.

Nevertheless, it is I who has the final say in how I call myself. We are all given some license to tell others that which defines "I" and "them." Confession is important to all of us – we all know very well what it means to tell a secret. Our sorted system of sexuality allows us to evenly elucidate to others that which we are not. With efficiency, though, come certain sacrifices. Gay might be understood nationally, but our memoirs will not all tell the same story. To be black and queer looks very different than to be white and queer. Just as to be woman and queer might only bear superficial resemblance to what it means to be man and queer. And, to complicate matters further, sometimes gay men and lesbians find themselves attracted to people of the opposite gender – and, dare I say it – sometimes it's not just about experimentation.

L. G. B. T. They all fail to account for the amalgamation of our experiences. Can any system of classification meet our constantly evolving needs? Will mere words ever be able to capture something as deeply meaningful as the way we structure our sexual lives? I do not pretend to know the answers to these questions. Even queer, definitionless by definition, has managed to escape the Academy and become ensconced in our sexual vocabulary. In a capitalist culture that feeds off of marketing to an ever-evolving set of identities, something as deliciously nebulous as queer stands little chance of surviving intact. It, too, will be digested and left lacking.

I am not interested in discounting the very real fact that our language, problems aside, has made room for experiences not otherwise possible. L, G, B and T all have rich histories that continue to give new meaning to our lives. They can, at times, provide shelter from the homophobic culture we find ourselves in. But however valuable these identities have been, we cannot avoid recognizing that they have also created boundaries. Lines have been drawn that threaten to limit our actions and desires. This, my friends, is all much too bland to be sexual liberation. To ever be truly free, we must demand more than this water-downed version of emancipation. Is that too much to ask?

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