

## THE LAST WORD

## 'Queers': More on the Politics of Language

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In "A Queery..." (Lambda, October 2000) Fred Hashagen pointed out a bias currently present in GLBT discourse—we seem to have embraced the word "queer" to describe ourselves; in that, we seem to have disregarded the fact that "queer" is a disparaging term for a homosexual. And this, according to Hashagen, is not merely a linguistic or terminological issue, language being the powerful political tool it is. In what follows I suggest another way of looking at the issue—our use of the term "queer" does not have to be interpreted as a symptom of *ignoring* political implications of words, but quite the opposite—as a maneuver that *exploits* political implications. It is important to note, however, that I do not attempt to provide a decisive argument to the effect that we should definitely keep using the term; I only point out some considerations that might support such a position.

One fairly naïve reason for using the term "queer" is as an "umbrella" word for all gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders. Given the disparaging connotations of the term, however, Hashagen suggests we use the specific terms "gay," "lesbian," etc. But this seems to miss an important point. The motivations behind the use of the term "queer" as an umbrella term are not merely considerations of brevity or convenience. The idea that the term is supposed to convey is that in some important sense there is a *common* gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identity; that, at least to some extent, we share the same values and inter-

ests. The term "queer" provides an anchor to ground us to this shared identity that challenges and is contrasted with the heterosexual identity.

But even if an umbrella term is important, why should we use a disparaging term as our umbrella term? Because by using the term we *exploit* its negative implications for our own political purposes; we dismantle the term from some of its undesirable connotations, thereby achieving both change of attitude and power while keeping, and transforming, other connotations, again to fit our political purpose of differentiating ourselves.

First, by embracing the term we, to some extent, take the sting out of it, and gain power. We take the sting out of it since by using it ourselves we say that what "they" consider as "suspicious" or as "questionmuch wider term than "gay" or "lesbian;" it can be associated with an entire culture, or ways of living (think of the close connections between queerness and the Camp culture).

This broadening of the notion can serve two important purposes. As an antithesis to the assimilationist sentiments within our community, it emphasizes and highlights the differences between "us" and the "bourgeois" heterosexuals. I'm using the double quotations because I'm fully aware of the stereotypical nature of my last remarks. First, the "Camp" notion is associated mostly with male homosexuals; second, many gay people, including most probably myself, are quite "boring" and not at all "Campy;" finally, not all straight people are "bourgeois" in

the bad sense of the term. All this, however, should not make us ignore the positive value, both for other people as well as an inherent value, of some elements of the queer identity, broadly conceived. More importantly, the broadening of the notion of homosexuality that the term "queer" allows emphasizes the error in the idea, widespread mostly among heterosexuals, that the sexual identity of a person is exhausted by his or her sexual habits. On this view, the use of the term queer contains a critique, a challenge, and a refusal of sexually defined identities.

I would like to conclude by repeating the disclaimer; much of what I said in favor of using the term "queer" can be objected. In particular, people might think that assimilation should be an ideal for the GLBT community or that promoting the "Campy" elements amounts to promoting damaging stereotypes. Furthermore, processes of meaning and attitude changes are subtle and on-going; they are far from being stabilized. Unfortunately, I don't have the space or the knowledge to address these important issues. I have only tried to provide a possible framework of thinking in which the use of the term "queer" can be viewed as an empowering, affirmative, self-nominated identity label that is conducive to our political goals. To the extent that these considerations hold, our use of the term does not ignore the rhetorical and political significance of language; it uses it.

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