

July 2016 – Automatic Writing

5–6 minutes

The use of queer as an umbrella term is not a description of an empirically or pre-discursively existing quality common to certain forms of difference, but a normative conception of how difference is to be understood: abjected forms of difference should be positively embraced not merely despite but *because of* the way they clash with prevailing social norms. Put another way: queer does not describe static pre-political facts about subjects who are essentially queer, but articulates difference-in-conflict with a society that seeks to dominate and constrain it.

There is no politically neutral act of naming. To name a collection of people queer is to impose a meaning on that collection of people that those people do not necessarily endorse. It is without a doubt an exercise of symbolic power. But this is equally true of any other name you might choose for anything. The term 'gay', for example, is not embraced by all of those for whom it is routinely used. There are plenty of men who fuck other men who do not call themselves gay, not simply because they are closeted or because of internalised homophobia, but because they do not see themselves reflected in the political, cultural and social dimensions of gay identity.

Supposedly non-political merely-descriptive terms such as 'homosexual' or 'men who have sex with men', on the other hand, are often rejected precisely because they detach sexual practices from forms of community that give them meaning. Any attempt to aggregate a set of particulars under a common term involves an overwriting of their particularity. The coherence of any particular symbolisation is purchased through an elision of some dimension of reality, which is always infinitely more complex and heterogeneous than language can cope with. The alternative is to never have names for anything.

The terms we choose to announce ourselves collectively are never simply descriptive of pre-existing realities, but are attempts to produce forms of collective subjectification at particular historical moments to engender particular forms of solidarity and struggle, and as such are necessarily tied to the exigencies of organising resistance. 'Gay', 'lesbian', 'transsexual', 'transgender', 'bisexual' (as well as the ever-evolving alphabet soup names for The Community) are all terms insisted upon by particular political factions at particular moments in history as assertions of the positive social value of particular forms of difference against stigmatisation, criminalisation, violence and discrimination. Queer likewise is a response to a perceived need to develop new forms of self-definition due to the shift from repression to co-optation and assimilation in straight society's strategy for our containment. It is a conscious project to outmaneuver the dynamics of co-optation through understanding ourselves not in terms of positive attributes we supposedly commonly possess but negatively and fluidly in terms of our common relation to structurally enforced norms. The repurposing of the slur 'queer' is inextricable from this definition because it is precisely from the position of abjection it implies that we choose to fight: we are the other that straight society must continually exclude in order to sustain itself and it is on that basis that we organise.

Clearly there is always a multiplicity of interacting factors behind any particular disavowal of queerness, but the debate over the term has oddly tended to proceed as if these always and everywhere originate in a pre-political innocence rather than being potentially strategic interventions by agents with their own divergent political commitments. Sure, there are those for whom the term itself is for them too strongly associated with shame and violence who do not embrace the label 'queer', but share a commitment to the kind of politics it implies. But equally, there are those who reject the term because their politics has an essentially conservative orientation: e.g. those in positions of power within the LGBT community who are threatened by the kind of political community queer attempts to bring into existence, those for whom the queer rejection of respectability undermines their project of securing acceptance through conformity and integration etc.

The act of naming is inherently contentious. It necessarily takes place in the midst of the contradictions of a particular point in time and involves decisions about how to respond to those contradictions. Calling ourselves queer is a political decision and not everyone is going to like it. Fine. Agitation for radically transformative change is never going to be about finding nice language that everyone can get behind. It's inherently divisive, and ongoing debate is a necessary correlate. But that debate is between those who wish to define our collective experiences of difference in a hostile society in terms oriented to a particular kind of fight, and those who oppose and seek to prohibit that definition. Those in the latter camp have not chosen a neutral position and there is no reason to treat their wishes as sacrosanct.