

Pardon Me, Have You Seen My Sexual Orientation?
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The explosion of mainstream understanding of and discourse about transgender literally, crossing genders beyond Jerry Springer gawping and the full medical Renee Richards model of transsexuality has sparked a difficult debate within what used to be known as “the gay community” about exactly how to resolve sticky issues of queer taxonomy. Classifying a person’s sexual orientation, never an easy task, has been complicated tenfold by the fact that people are changing genders, adopting multiple genders, or casting off gender entirely. What is the sexual orientation of someone who has no gender, no matter with whom they choose to join whatever genitalia they may have?

It is here that I seem to have lost my sexual orientation.

Not in the absolute sense of having left it on top of a soda machine at a gas station on the Jersey Turnpike, you understand, but more along the lines of how you remember that you used to have a copy of the Beatles White Album on CD and you’re pretty sure it’s in one of the boxes in the attic, but you don’t really care to go and look for it. It’s around somewhere, but who knows where?

Once upon a time, I was a dyke. In literal terms, it meant I dated and slept with women, and when I said I was a dyke, people understood what I meant by that. It left some things still to the imagination, like whether or not I might use a dildo or if I was a vegetarian, but for the most part we had a certain level of understanding about it. This, however, was more than ten years ago, and something interesting has happened to sexual orientation since then.

Homosexual, as I understand it, means that you desire, romantically and sexually, people of the same sex. Or is it gender? What’s gender again? Okay, try this I’m a biologically female person, and I’m dating or sleeping with a person who identifies as male, is taking hormones, uses the name Michael, and has a distinct and, frankly exciting three day growth of beard but nonetheless, at least at this moment, has the same body parts that I have. Or my lover is female, same parts and all, is named Evangeline, is smooth, smooth and soft as any self respecting lover of women could hope her beloved to be, but was born Robert in the upper reaches of Maine and is the father of two children and had surgery a couple of years ago to make the parts. Or if the object of my lust is has a full set of male genitalia but thinks of it as a big clit and identifies as female and is named Jeanne. Still a dyke?

Right.

Around the turn of the century, the English language made a etymological shift from describing the behavior of sexuality to defining it as an identity. Bette Midler, Bloomingdale’s, and Fire Island notwithstanding, the concept of a “gay” culture of identity is less than a hundred years old and even at that young age is falling apart at the seams. The first clues were in the world of AIDS prevention: programs to prevent transmission where men met for casual, anonymous sex with one another were first called Gay Outreach programs, but that was quickly abandoned. And why? Because it turned out that many of the men who were joyfully having sexual congress behind the shrubbery with other men did not consider themselves to be gay. They were horny, they were curious, they were just blowing off some steam, they were married for gods sake. And so the programs became known as MSM programs not

a new sexual perversion, but shorthand for Men who have Sex with Men. A behavioral descriptor, rather than an identity.

Meanwhile, back at the BatCave™, women who had sex with women were also abandoning the organic cotton, hand sewn by the collective banner of Lesbian Identity, in favor of Feminist, Dyke, Bulldagger, Butch, and Femme, to name some of the more popular ones, to say nothing of Drunk, Experimenting, It Turns Him On To Watch Us, and that Smith College favorite, Lesbian Until Graduation. Women proved no better at fitting ourselves into a single identity based label than men did, and terrible battles raged among women about who did or did not have the “right” to call herself a lesbian, based on a matrix measurement of behavior, the result of which varied with year, geographic position, race, class, and what fiery speaker had recently singed the local campus podia.

All of that was hard enough, and led to such confusing and decidedly uneuphonious constructions as Lesbian With Boyfriend and Queer Heterosexual don't ask, before the explosion of understanding regarding genders that left a lot of people, who had already been on the fringes of normative sexual orientation anyway, up the proverbial creek without the necessary implement. And, because this culture posits sexual orientation as an identity, it also created a great deal of identity confusion.

It goes something like: I am a woman, I have a girlfriend, I am a lesbian. So far, so good. Now, my lesbian girlfriend comes over the course of months or years to the difficult decision that she feels, for all intents and purposes much more like a he, and so is going to henceforth identify as male it is rarely this simple, but bear with me. I was a lesbian yesterday, but today I'm a straight woman? How can that be? It is for this reason that conferences and support groups for transgendered people have SOFFA significant other, family, and friend outcroppings where SOFFAs can support each other though the process of having to learn a whole new identity to be with the same partner! The partner has not changed, the sexual behavior may or may not change somewhat but is still between the same two people, and yet suddenly everyone has a fresh, shiny new identity. People speak fondly of injecting a sense of newness into their sexual lives with long term partners, but I hardly think that sudden onset identity crisis is what Cosmo, or even Nerve, recommends.

At the base, the current terms of sexual orientation that the language offers hetero, homo, bi are problematic because they rely on a bipolar gendered system that is coming apart at the seams even as we fuck. In order to identify myself as a heterosexual, I first have to be able to identify in some sort of concrete way what my own gender is, and then decide whether it has an opposite, which still does not, in the strictest sense, fulfill the definition of heterosexual because hetero isn't Greek for “opposite,” it's Greek for “other”. So as long as I'm attracted to people of a different gender than I am, I am heterosexual, except that in this language that's really just one other and also I might be attracted to someone who is the same sex but a different gender, and so I as a butch could therefore be attracted to femmes and call myself heterosexual under that definition. Not to mention the very difficult word bisexual, which creates an artificial midpoint between two things “opposite” sexes which may or may not exist, and also presupposes with the word bi a sexuality that encompasses two genders which two?

You begin to see the problem.

Please understand I am not advocating a wholesale abandonment of the terms with which we are already comfortable, despite the increasing number of initials we need

to add to encompass them all, as witnessed by the unfortunate case of the University Of Massachusetts' Stonewall Center, a model of inclusiveness and a pioneer in getting the needs of transgender students addressed, which is now reduced to describing itself as a resource center for GLBTHQQUIA students. On the very much other hand, Towson University's student group of a similar persuasion preciently tagged itself DSOC, the Diverse Sexual Orientation Collective in the early eighties and has stuck with it ever since. But the bubbling series of half assed attempts to describe and define as sexual orientations a set of diverse sexual behaviors for which we don't have a lot of language is making the word Queer a term which many see as simple, direct, and somewhat forgiving seem a lot more attractive to some of us as a catchall appellation for any non normative sexual orientation, even if we have to include plushies to have it that way. Queer doesn't assume any gender, or any sexual behavior, only a certain disregard for social norms regarding gendered and sexual behavior. That's a sexual orientation that may wear better, whatever changes the next hundred years may bring.