

Queer;

The contested reclaiming of a word

The word *queer* has changed meaning in the past twenty or so years. For centuries it has been used as a slur toward members of the homosexual community. It is important to understand the history of the term and how, in the reclaiming of the word by the homosexual community, it has become both an identity and an overarching term to define the community as a whole. As these changes and

reclaiming of the word are recent, it is important for those who use the term to understand the history behind it and why it may still offend people.

Queer has always been a word with multiple meanings, which should be recognized. However as of late the word's secondary definition has turned into the primary definition, and when it is used the way it was originally intended, and as it is defined first in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, many don't hear it as that any longer.

The first definition in the *OED* is as follows:

"1. Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric. Also: of questionable character; suspicious, dubious."¹

This is not the meaning that comes to mind when the word queer is said or used. Not anymore, for those living in the LGBTQ community, prior to reclaiming the word, queer has had very strong negative connotations. And this definition often comes to mind when it is heard:

"2. Colloq. (freq. derogatory). A homosexual; esp. a male homosexual."²

This definition isn't inherently negative, but it is often used in a derogatory manner. Until the reclaiming of the word this was the term that was used while humans were being thrown on the ground and being beaten with sticks or rocks. This was the only word that needed to be uttered in order to explain the horrendous treatment of individuals due to their sexual orientations. This became abundantly clear when in 2013 a sixty-six year old man was applying for a job at Colorado College and was outraged to find the word queer was being used when asking about gender information on their application. He is quoted having said, "I couldn't believe it. I thought I was going to have a stroke. It's totally from the Dark

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "queer," accessed September 26, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236>

² *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "queer," (secondary definition), accessed September 26, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156235?rskey=BMbbhJ&result=1#eid>

Ages.”³ This is coming from a man who grew up in an atmosphere where the word queer was used as an excuse to deny others their basic human rights. It was a much different time than 2013 when gender orientation is being asked on college applications. The College said that the times have changed and “today’s youth embraces (the term) very well.”⁴

The word is taking a change for the better. It is becoming a word reclaimed by the community, a word that people identify with and use to describe their own sexualities. Turning back to the *OED*, we can see that while the definition has stayed the same, there is an added note that “from the late 1980s it began to be used as a neutral or positive term...without regard to, or in implicit denial of, its negative connotations.”⁵ This turn in definition is for some, difficult to wrap their minds around, but has been accepted by many members of the community as of late.

In talking with another member of the community, who wishes to remain anonymous, stated why he uses the term as both part of his identity and that it is an overarching term for the community as a whole in a very simple to understand manner. “The word Queer unites all people in the LGBT⁶ Spectrum easily and efficiently but even with this all queer people do not identify with the word queer. I identify with the word queer because of the inherent political nature of the word.” This political nature is often a turn-off for many within the community, often politics has turned its back on the community and this word with it. But since it has been reclaimed by the community this term has become an easy-to-understand term. He went on to say that, “Queer has always stood for standing against the norm and

³ Anthony Cotton, “Colorado College defends use of “queer” on application,” *The Denver Post*, November 8, 2013, http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_24478848/colorado-college-defends-use-queer-application?IADID=Search-www.denverpost.com-www.denverpost.com

⁴ “Gay man upset about Colorado College’s ‘queer’ application question” *Fox 31 Denver*, (Denver, CO), November 8, 2013, <http://kdvr.com/2013/11/08/gay-pennsylvania-man-upset-about-colorado-colleges-usage-of-queer-on-application/>

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “queer,” (side note on secondary definition) accessed September 26, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236#eid27444570>

⁶ In this quote, my friend chose not to use the letter “Q” for queer in this acronym because in this sense he is using queer as an overarching term for the community. Later in the paper I elect to use the LGBTQ acronym to acknowledge that queer is both an overarching term for the community and often used as a personal identity.

with reclaiming it, and queer people have chosen to stand against the norm. It stands for changing the norm and challenging the norm, and asserting your existence... Queer means fucking shit up.”⁷

The word queer in this light has moved back toward the original definition from 1513, because “fucking shit up” can be taken to mean eccentric or being of questionable character; suspicious, dubious and by moving the definition back to this the community is staking claim.⁸ “Fucking shit up” means in essence to make others question what they have decided to believe about themselves, about other people, and about life in general, and that is what it means to be queer. In this day and age where people still have to come out as something other than heterosexual, to be queer is to be eccentric, suspicious, and dubious. Because what this word means varies so strongly from person to person, when it is used as an identifier for sexuality, the community is making the word their own and deciding that no one can tell them what it means, they get to decide this for themselves. They are fucking shit up.

⁷ Zach Crutchfield, (RHA representative for RING and life-long queer man) in discussion with the author, September 24, 2014.

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “queer,” accessed September 26, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236>

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Cotton, Anthony. "Colorado College defends use of "queer" on application." *The Denver Post*. November 8, 2013. http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_24478848/colorado-college-defends-use-queer-application?IADID=Search-www.denverpost.com-www.denverpost.com.

This newspaper article is only a year old but shows the large generational gap within the community about the use and reclaiming of the word queer. To the man that this article is about, queer is still a negative and derogatory term, which is something that must always be remembered when reclaiming words. There are going to be those who have lived so long with a negative definition that they can't fathom a word changing meaning, and as it takes a long time to change they might not have realized it.

Crutchfield, Zach RHA representative for RING and life-long queer man. In discussion with the author. September 24, 2014.

I discussed the word queer with my good friend Zach, who has a gender and women studies concentration and studies queer theory in his free time. I chose this quote from our conversation because I felt it best summed up the changing nature of the word queer and how it is used today better than *the Urban Dictionary* or the *OED*. This is what the term means from someone who uses it as his identifier within the community and has had the opportunity to research and live the changes.

Oxford English Dictionary Online. s.v. "queer." accessed September 26, 2014. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236>.

This citation is the first definition of queer in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this is the definition that was what queer meant before it was used to refer to homosexual males. Even though the focus of the paper is the reclaiming of *queer* by the LBGTQ community, I felt that this was important to recognize in the way that parts of the community are using the word as an umbrella term and an identifier.

Oxford English Dictionary Online. s.v. "queer" secondary definition. accessed September 26, 2014. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156235?rskey=BMbbhJ&result=1#eid>.

This citation is the secondary definition of *queer* as a noun. It is the term that the LBGTQ community has reclaimed the term from. I felt it was very important to provide this definition as it is part of the basis for the rest of the paper. The change in meaning, from something strange in the adjectival to a homosexual male in the noun form is very interesting and is something that I believe the community has drawn into the way it has redefined the term.

Oxford English Dictionary Online. s.v. "queer" side note on secondary definition. accessed September 26, 2014. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236#eid27444570>.

In this side note, the *Oxford English Dictionary* addresses the change in definition of the term, and its derogatory nature. With a slight change to the definition of queer, it no longer just

means gay males, but can be used as an umbrella term for all in the LGBTQ community if need be.

Urban Dictionary. s.v. "queer." accessed September, 26, 2014.

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=queer>.

I decided against using *the Urban Dictionary* as a source for my paper because I didn't feel the definition was any more accurate than the side note in the Oxford English Dictionary. It didn't quite capture the power within the reclaiming of the term as well as my discussion with Zach and something was lacking, as it often is, so I decided not to use it.

Webauthors. "Gay man upset about Colorado College's 'queer' application question" *Fox 31 Denver*, Denver, CO, November 8, 2013, <http://kdvr.com/2013/11/08/gay-pennsylvania-man-upset-about-colorado-colleges-usage-of-queer-on-application/>

This newspaper article is about the use of queer on an application, however the tone is very different. The college and writers of this article could not fathom why someone would be upset about the use of this term. Reclaiming words and changing definitions is something that everyone who uses the term needs to be vitally aware of. Because of things like generational gaps, the use of one wrong word might bring the wrong sort of attention to your organization.