

that identity. Even though I didn't get a chance to learn directly from my Arab grandmothers, I figured out how to embrace my Arab American heritage, and how to open up the space for my dad to as well. I don't understand how I managed to be the transmitter of culture in my household. However, in this way, it seems my *sittos'* legacy lives on in me.

THE END OF GENDERQUEER

ROCKO BULLDAGGER

I've been conflicted about writing this essay. Horrified, actually. I wish to deal with the topic of gender in a queer context, but for the piece still to remain readable and interesting. I want to write for all of my friends, for those who are passionate about gender and for those who are thrilled just by the thought of discussing how words acquire and change meaning. But I also want to write for those who do not spend every spare moment agonizing over the use of language. Most of all, I wish to avoid launching into the jargon-heavy, divisive monologue that usually accompanies the word *genderqueer*. I do not want to produce yet another queer writing sample that spends time debating the minute details that distinguish one subidentity from another. I

don't want to assert all kinds of distinctions that alienate queers from one another and guarantee that any potential ally will be turned off by a mind-numbing litany of neologisms and self-aggrandizing swill. You could take "The End of Genderqueer" as a call for an end to the use of this word. I am sick to death of hearing it. However, I cannot be so easily rid of it. Whether I like it or not, and whether genderqueers can stand to have me or not, I've got a foot in the genderqueer identity.

A few weeks ago, I was wondering if I should bother to finish this essay. Then something happened that reminded me why I needed to. I was riding my bike down the street when an old man sitting outside the off-track betting place near my house called out, "Is that a boy or a girl?" People have been reprimanding me with this question for as long as I can remember. If people haven't stopped asking me this question at the age of thirty-two, I doubt they ever will. So I can't resist writing about this topic. I can't resist risking all the booby traps of writing about identity politics and the so-called queer radical scene. In calling for the end of genderqueer, I am considering the purpose of this word. I am also writing about myself, my personal history, and my problematic relationship with both the word and the subculture in which it is frequently used.

: ***Between Genders or Overly Gendered?*** :

From *The New York Times's* Sunday Styles, March 7, 2004: "Some transgender students aren't moving between sexes; they're parked somewhere in the middle and prefer to describe themselves as 'gender queer'—signifying that they reject the either-or male-female system."¹

From *Time Out New York*, February 3, 2005: "Genderqueer: This

umbrella term refers to anyone who doesn't fit into the traditional binary male-female system—from androdykes to trannyboys."²

My own personal definition of *genderqueer*: (1) A person who is painfully deliberate and consciously political in their gender expression. (2) Someone who identifies with efforts to subvert oppressive power dynamics by undermining traditional gender expectations. (3) A person whose gender presentation is overdetermined by traditionally gendered signs—somebody who displays excessive femininity or masculinity. Conveniently, this definition could potentially include me, my girlfriend, radical straight people, all our transsexual friends, and anyone else who actually wanted to identify as such.

Why doesn't my definition focus on being in the middle, or outside the male-female binary? Because I want to pull genderqueer back into my own camp, where I first met it, as one of many pragmatic political identities that aspiring queer revolutionaries can use to explain who we are. I want *genderqueer* to be a true "umbrella" term that includes all of us who fuck with gender, who have gender on the brain, and who never take gender for granted.

: ***On Alienation and the Cutting Edge of Gender*** :

From the *Village Voice's* 25th annual queer issue, June 23, 2004: "But the genderqueer generation poses a new reality in which the world doesn't label our identities and our bodies; we do. If you spot these transmales at the Pride parade, or in your local bar, you have seen the future—and it's very queer indeed."³

From *Gay New York*, by George Chauncey: "In 1929, for instance, a conservative village paper attacked bohemian women for being 'so

ashamed of their sex that they do their best to appear like men . . . ' It went on to charge that 'the majority of that type manifestly endeavor to create a third sex.'"⁴

If we have documentation showing that queers were endeavoring to label their own identities and create a third sex back in 1929, when exactly does this smug queer future begin? It seems like a long time to be seated on the cutting edge . . .

: *On My First Contact with Genderqueer* :

I don't remember the exact time when I first encountered the word, but I am sure it was sometime in 1999, at the now defunct annual True Spirit conference. True Spirit was a transgender conference primarily for masculine-identified, female-born people. I met a whole bunch of folks who, like me, were alienated from gender and committed to reclaiming, valorizing, and politicizing our differences. Mostly, though, it was just refreshing for each individual attending this conference to connect with a whole community of (hot) queerly gendered, activist-minded deviants. We stayed up late talking and hooking up and planning the revolution, or at least planning panels for the next conference. We formed immediate and intimate bonds.

The following year, at the same conference, some comrades and I held a panel we called "Queer as Fuck." The purpose was to discuss how punk was a way to find strength in difference, a way to refuse societal definitions of how a girl should act, and a way to turn being an incorrigible freak into an actual lifestyle choice. It was also to discuss how, for many gender deviants, a punk identity was a first step on the lifelong road of opposition to normality and complacency. Among other

things, this was a conversation about how all of our personal experiences with our own unique forms of defiance have been as empowering as they have been difficult. It was an opportunity to laugh together at how people perceived us, and congratulate each other for surviving harsh and sometimes abusive treatment. Most importantly, this panel affirmed how gender malcontents need to care for each other and affirmed our shared commitment to gender liberation and social justice. There was so much energy, ambition, and dedication to revolutionary change—all in a genderqueer context!

: *On Changes I Have Witnessed in the Media* :

A reporter from the online magazine *Salon* attended and covered the "Queer as Fuck" panel. The article she wrote had more in common with the 1929 "so ashamed of their sex" article than it did with the recent *Village Voice* "queer future." The crux of the article was that transgendered people either have a spiritual vision or a delusional psychiatric condition, and it varied in tone from uncomfortably describing the range of masculine appearances to uncomfortably dismissing their masculinity. "The ways the conferees transcended their fleshly limits sounded like a shared hallucination or a vision," wrote Virginia Vitzthum. Her article referred to conferencegoers as dykes, which was in contradiction to how the majority identified themselves.⁵ This was March 2000, and nowhere in the mainstream or even liberal media could you find mention of anyone permitted to define their own gender. But I didn't care, because I was so happy just to see the conference and particularly our panel mentioned in a way that seemed powerful and noteworthy, even if negative.

Fast-forward four years to November 2004. The *Metro*, a free daily paper that is not especially progressive, prints an interview with author JT Leroy. The *Metro* asks, "Do you consider yourself male or female?" JT replies, "I don't know. What do you think? It can be whatever I'm in the mood for. It changes day to day." And the interviewer takes JT's word for it. I can't help but think that's a major step forward. We know now that JT himself is a work of art, but I didn't care about that either, because I was just so happy to see the way media representation of gender has shifted toward allowing self-determination.⁶

It seems genderqueer is a concept whose time has finally come, rising up out of the ashes of twentieth-century village bohemia to a media where somewhat famous people are permitted to name, or decline to name, their own gender.

: ***On Avoiding Divisiveness*** :

Many of us went on to adopt "Queer as Fuck" as a motto for any and all subversive activity in any context. That could mean women wearing pants to their conservative workplaces, or androgyny in general, or facial tattooing, or your top-secret girlie panties. The motto connected all of our divergent and previously unrelated activities. It allowed us to feel a part of something larger than ourselves. Most importantly, "Queer as Fuck" did not have any room for a hierarchy of most radical to least radical. There was never any formal structure other than to say that any subversive action could be included. *Revolutionary* meant fucking shit up productively—not just being provocative and offensive, but being provocative and consciousness-raising. To this day my personal approach is to meet people where they are and to try to gradually in-

roduce them to my life experiences and beliefs surrounding my gender instead of assuming everyone needs to meet me where I am before we can connect. And that's what I think the evolving genderqueer scene is missing. There is too much focus on dividing the world into who gets it and who doesn't.

: ***On My Own Inclusion and Exclusion*** :

But maybe I myself have contributed to some of the unsatisfying ways genderqueerness has evolved. It could be argued that the whole "Queer as Fuck" thing was the beginning of the end for True Spirit. This panel and its subsequent incarnations overflowed conference rooms, and always spilled out messily into the host hotel's lobby and bar. Because it was somehow a gender-autonomous zone, and because of sheer sexual energy, True Spirit seemed to double in size every year through 2003. It spawned as many ideological arguments as it did new vocabulary words. It drew homeless queer youth, straight-identified transsexual men, punks of every variety—the pierced, the tattooed, and the truly broke who slept too-many-to-count in a single hotel room. Pissing off every available hotel in the Washington, D.C., area, gleefully exposing the underaged to sexually explicit material, chain-smoking in the lobby, arguing loudly, wearing SM gear shamelessly, sporting ridiculous hickeys . . . this was beautiful and consequently could never last. Yet it was no utopia. Expressions of femininity were less than welcome and masculinity was sometimes expressed through sexism. Half the time I felt like shit when I was there, isolated, depressed, angry, unattractive, and stagnant because I didn't opt for testosterone or surgery; but I never lost sight of the fact that the existence of this conference was

a miracle. Anyway, the thing that broke True Spirit was the question of exclusion. Could one conference meet the needs of both transmen and underage, overpierced genderqueers? Alas, no, nor could it meet the needs of all of us who fall into more nebulous territory. But it was great while it lasted, and to this day I am grateful to have experienced it.

Now I find article after article in the mainstream media attributing new meaning to the word *genderqueer*, meanings with which I feel less and less connection. I read increasingly narrow definitions of the concept, and hear from folks who have no sympathy for those who do not "get it." Is my participation in creating the meaning of genderqueer over? I used to feel that this was my word, my subculture, my movement. Now I see genderqueer articles in newspapers and magazines that I can't relate to at all.

The media has granted genderqueers trendiness and certainly contributed to the transformation of the word. In January 2004, *New York* magazine ran an article entitled "Where the Bois Are." *Boi* is a genderqueer variation on *boy*. This article screwed up people's pronouns and I am sure inspired many angry letters, but it also aired quite a bit of dirty laundry that I couldn't ignore.

New York magazine, 2004: "What all bois have in common is a lack of interest in embodying any kind of girliness, but they are too irreverent to adopt the heavy-duty, highly circumscribed butch role. To them, butch is an identity of the past, a relic from a world of Budweiser and motorcycles gone by."⁷

Should I lie to you and say these insults have no effect on me because I know who I am, and fuck what everyone thinks? Yes, of course. The problem is that genderqueers aren't "everyone." They're my own,

and somehow all the new media attention always finds them disowning butchness, because the identity itself comes with too much baggage. So here I have the mainstream media telling me what people in my own community think of me. For bois, *butch* contains too many expectations, too much tragedy, and too much drama. For me, *butch* contains my connection to a long history of fierce queers who made it possible for me to be as free as I am today with both my gender expression and my sexuality. The word also suggests a mature, confident, warm, sexy masculine energy that suits me just fine. Being butch used to be my way of being genderqueer, but now it seems to make my inclusion under the genderqueer umbrella impossible.

: *On Attitude* :

From the *Voice* (same issue as above): "Riley, on the other hand, wants to date biological men (called bioguys), a hopeless prospect, he says, because of 'male ignorance' about transmen."⁸ I have nothing but sympathy for the loneliness he is expressing and I have witnessed gay bioguys' transphobia. It's the dismissive attitude that gets to me. Biomales are not an entirely hopeless prospect, yet they are guaranteed to be hopeless if never given a chance. Attitude can keep us safe from rejection, but it can keep us safe from connection, too. Preemptively rejecting those who do not understand your gender insures that they never will.

Once I was introduced to a transguy at a sex party, and the very first thing he did was complain bitterly to me about how a lesbian had just hit on him, mistaking him for a dyke. I said, "Uh-huh," and moved on, but why protect this person's feelings? Did the weight of gender lend him priority in my shameful subconscious inner ranking of queer

radicals? (Drat that internalized misogyny.) Why didn't I just say what I thought? *Be flattered when someone is attracted to you!*

So, men are too ignorant and butches are dinosaurs. Lesbians don't get it. What is with this more-radical-than-thou attitude? I saw a drag king in Philly whose entire shtick consisted of asserting that no one could possibly understand hir complicated gender identity. Between being tragically misunderstood, perpetually on the cutting edge, and more radical than everyone else, when do genderqueers have time to connect with others? (I would feel more sympathetic if I weren't actively being excluded and looked down upon.) Before somebody even has a chance to be interested, they are dismissed as ignorant or convicted on charges of a mistaken pronoun. So many strict rules about how to be what you are, what to call it, and how you can expect others to relate to it! Somehow we've lost our tolerance for those who do not understand us, regardless of their intentions. If our language and sensibilities are too refined for other homos to get, can we still share a movement for social justice?

: ***Top Ten People Most Excluded from
Your Genderqueer Scene*** :

1. People of color
2. Femmes
3. Transwomen and others who insist on continuing to use female pronouns in this day and age
4. People who do not wear the uniform: work pants, trucker hats, et cetera
5. People over twenty-seven, unless they have contributed to your top surgery fund

6. People who express hetero attractions
7. People who do not speak the latest activist lingo
8. People who aren't kissing your ass right now
9. Transsexuals who have "fully" transitioned, however you define that today
10. Cross-dressers

: ***Conclusion*** :

I always wanted genderqueer to unite me with other transgressive queers. Note that I said to unite, not to find people who identify exactly like me. People don't get me, and that is okay. I am not holding my breath for a place where I do not have to explain myself. I am just working on creating a space where the explanation is welcome. That's what I want genderqueer to be about. I want *genderqueer* to be not only an umbrella term for those who reject M or F, but also an umbrella term for all those who queer their gender. And remember that thing I mentioned about caring for each other and sharing a commitment to gender liberation and social justice? Maybe these qualities are lacking and that's where the movement has become a scene. Exclusivity and attitude are qualities of a scene, not a revolutionary subculture. Genderqueer was my movement, but it's definitely not my scene.

Despite all of this, I will always think of my friends and myself as genderqueer in one way or another. Our queerness can't be pried away from that extra-special gender spectacle we live in. It's our gender that's always troubling, always calling attention to itself, always acting like a dowsing rod drawing out sexuality all over the place. (I could write a whole other story about how much I learn about people just from their

reaction to my appearance.) Genderqueer is ours in a sense, because we're wholeheartedly engaged with the politics of gender, because microscopic examination of gender has shaped who we are, and because gender is the stuff of our sexual identities.

I could conclude by claiming: We are genderqueer because we fuck with gender, and this may include the refusal of both M and F, but on a good day it includes a whole hell of a lot more! But the truth is, I rarely use the word, and I don't intend to start using it again just because I've launched all these thoughts out into the world. This is quite an unsatisfying conclusion! I suppose that if I have left you with an up-in-the-air, inconclusive discomfort with the word *genderqueer*, then you understand where I'm coming from.

MY KIND OF CRUISING

LIZ ROSENFELD

: *Virgin Cruiser* :

When I was a freshman in college, I fell desperately in love with a straight man who was in a monogamous relationship with one of my close female friends. At the time, I was regarded as high femme, which, as a fat woman, I felt was the only way I could be sexually recognized. By bringing attention to my wide hips, breasts, and butt, I could reinvent myself as a voluptuous object of desire. However, the only time my crush gave me any sexual attention was the evening I dressed in boy drag for the first time, as a cowboy.

On my way home that night, I happened to run into my crush. Without words, he led me to a tree, where I proceeded to give him a