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Queerness Without Binary
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Abstract

Under the tentative definition Maren Behrensen offers in “Born that Way? The Metaphysics of Queer Liberation,” “queer” refers to acts, practices, and identifications that stand in opposition to the prevailing ideology of sex dichotomy, gender dichotomy, and the primacy of heterosexuality. In this article, I will be arguing that this definition risks reifying these respective structures as necessary to the existence of queer identity. If “queer” is only defined by its relation to gender dichotomy, sex dichotomy, and the primacy of heterosexuality, then the term is dependent on the existence of these structures in order to make sense. I maintain that queer identity can exist without sex and gender dichotomy, as well as the primacy of heterosexuality, as a committed, devotional practice of impression fluidity and critical curiosity. By impression fluidity, I mean a dynamic transformation and rearrangement of romantic and sexual performances, appearances, and behaviors that communicate gender or biological sex, in accordance with the queer agent’s current social desires. By critical curiosity, I mean the preliminary developmental process of exploring and acclimating to unfamiliar romantic and sexual performances, appearances, and behaviors. In this way, queer becomes a volitional identity that is taken upon for the purpose of liberation from body ignorance.

“Queer” Explication

The term “queer” has seen significant revision in usage and definition over the last twenty years. Originally a derogatory term, denoting a troubling strangeness or deviation from the standard established by society, “queer” has been mostly reclaimed by the sexual minority and academic communities. “Queer”, in a broad conception, often functions as an umbrella term that refers to everything in the LGBT spectrum, thus granting sexual minority status. This political form of the term acts as a kind of short-hand reference for the sake of expediency. Yet this does not seem to be the only form of “queer” besides the pejorative conception. In certain conceptions of the sexual minority acronym, “Q” (for “queer”) is added along with LGBT (etc.). This seems to imply that “queer” is not merely an umbrella term that refers to all sexual minorities, but is in itself a distinct identity that is parallel with being a gay man, a lesbian, a bi-sexual, a trans-sexual, and so on. It is this form of “queer”
that I am chiefly concerned with, since the definition offered would attempt to explicate what being queer means to one’s self and one’s community.¹

In the article “Born that Way? The Metaphysics of Queer Liberation,” Maren Behrensen offers a tentative definition of queer as “acts, practices, and identifications that stand in opposition to the prevailing ideology of sex dichotomy, gender dichotomy, and the primacy of heterosexuality” (Behrensen 2013, 5). She explains that the term “queer” is utilized in a fashion that questions whether or not sexual or romantic identification is stable in the same way that the term “identity” seems to connote. The term can be used to describe a type of person, but can also refer to acts or behave as an obfuscation of a person’s romantic and sexual interests (Behrensen 2013, 2).

This definition and implicit usage ties into the overall political project of queer liberation. The basic aims of this political project, according to Behrensen, are as follows: “increase the visibility of LGBTQI-persons and their social and political influence. Defend their rights. Protect them from violence” (Behrensen 2013, 2). Behrensen follows this up that progress made within the political, legal, and moral realms has managed to achieve a portion of this project, but that this is not enough. Behrensen argues that “[w]hat queer liberation aspires to also is—metaphysically rather strange—freedom to choose one’s sexual character and one’s sexual identity” (Behrensen 2013, 3). This metaphysical position would accommodate a more complex account of sexual identity development, where an agent is both compelled towards a particular sexual object preference and also freely chooses one’s own sexual object preference and identity.

This explanation for sexual character and identity would directly contrast with the typical accounts of sexual development, which can be typically categorized as either biologically determined or socially determined. Rather than having sexual character and identity being determined by biological

¹ Thank you to Dr. Peter Higgins for explicating the distinction between “queer” as umbrella term and “queer” as identity.
impulses or social adjustment, one could have a self-chosen sexual identity, built through adherence to maxims. According to Behrensen, allowing for the possibility of volitional type of sexual character and identity is essential to the project of queer liberation since it encourages making queers a recognizable and accepted type of person, thereby making “queer” a self-actualized or a self-authored state (Behrensen 2013, 5). By adopting this metaphysical position, positive valuation of queer lives can become integrated into queer liberation, rather than simple resistance to moral criticism of queer acts (Behrensen 2013, 5).

The Problem of Conceptual Obsolescence

The project of establishing sexual identity as a volitional practice is something that I applaud. I am in complete agreement with Maren Behrensen regarding the problematic implications of solely biological or solely socially determined explanations of sexual identity and character development. Whether the Kantian approach to the question of sexual development is ultimately successful remains to be seen and is not my focus in this article. Instead, I am focusing instead on the definition of “queer” itself and its problematic reliance on binary structures such as sex and gender dichotomy, as well as the primacy of heterosexuality.

By defining something in virtue of it challenging something else, one makes it functionally dependent on whatever it is challenging. If \( x \) is defined as “against \( y \),” this means that in order for \( x \) to make sense or remain coherent, \( y \) must be necessary. If \( y \) ceases to be a present component, then \( x \) is rendered obsolete and loses its function. For example, if I defined the identity of “Democrat” as engaging in political behaviors that challenge Republican political behaviors, being a Democrat would only make sense insofar as there were Republican political behaviors. If there were no Republican political behaviors, a person who had the identity of Democrat would, at least on a definitional level, cease being a Democrat, since the position is defined as \( mere \) opposition. There would be nothing for them to oppose, therefore the function of the identity would cease.
In the case of Behrensen’s definition of queer, someone is queer in virtue of opposing the binary structures of sex/gender dichotomy and the primacy of heterosexuality. If these structures were to vanish somehow, either through gradual social progression or sudden, inexplicable consensus, “queer” would cease to have coherence. The term and the identity that it defined would become obsolete, since the sexual practices, appearances, and behaviors that it would be challenging, no longer existed. These sexual practices, appearances, and behaviors would still have value perhaps, in and of themselves, but since this value isn’t explicitly or implicitly mentioned in the definition, then we cannot say that they would still indicate a status of “queer” as such, at least under Behrensen’s conception.

It could be argued that this kind of conceptual obsolescence is unproblematic. After all, if the astounding came to pass and these oppressive structures were suddenly left behind, would we even want or need to keep such identity designations as “queer”, “lesbian”, “trans-sexual”, etc.? Perhaps it is the case that these are identities and preferences that can only describe deviations from an unjust heterosexual standard; in the brave new world that accepts and encourages non-dichotomous gender, these terms would perhaps become antiquated identity indicators, akin to terms like “viceroy,” “housecarl,” or “tsarina”.

However, the disanalogy between the identity indicator of “queer” and the identity indicator of “housecarl” illuminates a relevant point: “housecarl” is a social identifier that signifies participation within a particular political body, possessing political significance and authority (however limited that may be); “queer”, on the other hand, is a social identifier that signifies a state or way of being in the world, as a person in the world, distinct from whatever political positions a person might possess. Thus, we can conclude that there is a distinction between positions which have an explicit function of direct participation within the political realm (such as “housecarl”) and positions which are states or ways of being a person in the world, which have an implicit function of direct participation within the political realm (such as “queer”). The obsolescence of a state of being may indeed be desirable for the project of
social activism and equality. But the ethical considerations of eliminating a state of being that is so tied to identity through political action must be considered carefully. These ethical considerations lead outside the boundaries of this paper, but should be kept firmly in mind.

Since “queer” is a state of being, a way of operating in the world, which is only incidentally political due to the norms and preferences expressed by mainstream society, it doesn’t seem to follow that “queer” is merely political in definition. In other words, a state of being is more than simply what values you are politically committed against or what political values you hold in contrast to others. Sure, a negative conception of a state of being might be useful to provide an identity boundary from which to elaborate upon or an easy reference for establishing affiliations. But it will ultimately be incomplete, as the positive propositions that make up a person’s belief and value structure will not be accounted for within the identity. Establishing that one is not a fan of Garth Brooks, for example, allows one to possibly rule out an entire sub-culture affiliation (crossover country fans) and search for others that are more compatible. But the search must eventually end in some kind of positive value claim (“I enjoy U2, despite Bono’s banal lyrics.”) if one is to be firmly affiliated at all.

Defining “queer” solely as the opposition to sex/gender dichotomy and the primacy of heterosexuality risks establishing a kind of complementarity between the two concepts. Because “queer” is necessarily dependent on the presence of these binary structures in this definition, albeit through antagonism, we seemingly get two inseparable halves of a conceptual whole. On the one hand, we have the oppressive structures which dictate the mainstream conception of sex and gender, and on the other hand we have “queer” structure which is antithetically positioned to this mainstream conception.

This complementarity makes “queer” a fundamentally reactive identity, always looking towards the values of gender dichotomy in order to establish its own agenda. This places the identity in an inescapable dilemma: as long as “queer” is defined in necessary relation to gender dichotomy, the
authenticity and integrity of any values, behaviors, appearances, or sexual practices will be placed under suspicion. “Queer” would become a contrarian identity of “misfits” at best or a manipulative political tool at worst.

The Commitment of Queerness

If queerness is to escape its dependence on oppressive structures, what values, preferences, and behaviors must be held as necessary? It is tempting to place the identity in the liminal space between identities, overlapping some qualities, rejecting others, a kind of “queer-in-the-gaps” argument. Yet this liminal approach still suffers from a similar form of dependence that Behrensen’s definition has. Granted, it may not be as insidious as the complementarity with sex/gender dichotomy, but it still necessarily relies upon the presence of other structured identities (such as gay, lesbian, heterosexual, etc.), eliminating the possibility that “queer” is an identity truly parallel with other sexual minority identities.

Rather than placing “queer” necessarily in between other structured identities or using “queer” as a way to fill in the gaps that arise between positioned identity affiliations, perhaps “queer” can be thought of as a series of devotional commitments. The idea of being committed to an identity of sexual minority is not necessarily a foreign one, at least in a minimal sense. Being gay means for males one is nominally committed to finding people who appear as males preferable to people who appear as females in romantic or sexual interactions. Similarly, being lesbian means one is nominally committed to finding people who appear as females more preferable than people who appear as males in romantic or sexual interactions.

Queer identity is distinct from lesbian, gay, or bisexual identities, however, in the sense that the principal commitments entailed by those identities are determined by sexual object preference. Regardless of how one dresses, behaves in public, or speaks, the fundamental quality of being gay is feeling or acting upon a romantic or sexual preference for people who appear male, just as the
fundamental quality of lesbians is feeling or acting upon a romantic or sexual preference for people who appear to be female, and so on. Queer identity is also distinct from transsexual and intersexual commitments, insofar as it seems that a dominant principle of transsexual and intersexual communities is integration within another larger community (be it mainstream society or sexual minority society). It is important to note, however, that this principle of integration is not universally agreed upon within the transsexual or intersexual community as a core goal and remains a focus for debate, which I will leave to better scholars to explore. Regardless, queer identity is not solely motivated by sexual object preference (as it can also encompass non-sexual behaviors and appearances) nor is it solely motivated by an impulse toward integration (as it can also be a way of calling into question gender dichotomy and hetero-patriarchy, as well as raising the political consciousness of those around the queer agent).

The devoted commitments of queerness could be said to involve two main principles: (1) Queerness is primarily committed to impression fluidity, which is the dynamic transformation and rearrangement of romantic or sexual performances, appearances, or behaviors that communicate gender or biological sex, in accordance with the queer agent’s current social desires. (2) Queerness is secondarily committed to critical curiosity, which is the preliminary developmental process of exploring and acclimating to unfamiliar romantic and sexual performances, appearances, and behaviors. Under this conception, queerness would become a volitional practice of consistently acknowledging and celebrating the uncomfortable ambiguities of the human body in presentations of gender, biological sex, and sexual gratification.

**The First Commitment: Impression Fluidity**

Impression fluidity is defined as the dynamic combining and re-combining of romantic or sexual performances, appearances, or behaviors that communicate gender or biological sex, in accordance with the queer agent’s current social desires. This practice would involve taking traditionally gendered appearances, behaviors, or sexual performances and adapting them into a style of being that flouts or
rarearranges traditional continuity or coherency. These practices would be dictated by the queer agent’s
current social desires, adapting as necessary to each social context, according to their own judgment of
how to appear. Examples of gendered appearances, behaviors or sexual performances would include
wearing a dress, moving in a way that implies the presence of certain primary or secondary sexual
characteristics, or reaching orgasm through sexual penetration. Since this obviously consists of a wide
range of social behaviors, performances, and preferences, the queer agent would thus be identified by
an external commitment to ambiguous social impression of the body. This ambiguity may be subtle, as
in the case of an intersexual body who dresses according to what society imagines their sex to be and
utilizes movement styles and behaviors that suggest a wholly different gender or sex. It may also be a
clear and distinct presentation, as in the case of a person wearing an evening dress who also wears a
fully developed beard and short, cropped hair.

Devotion to impression fluidity would work towards the overcoming of social intimidation of
conformity. Rather than regard the informal and formal standards of appearance, behavior, and sexual
performance as impartial absolutes, one would see them as not only arbitrary limitations, but also
producers of styles to be adapted, transformed, subverted, and assimilated into a syncretic queer
identity. Impression fluidity could perhaps be the “craft” of the queer agent, with each gendered social
presentation potentially providing material for the ceaseless assembling and re-assembling of style,
according to the social desires of the queer agent. Note that this practice would have to be necessarily
devotional in order to be sufficient for queer identity. A heterosexual white male that decides to wear a
dress in public during Halloween, will not qualify as “queer” because (1) he would not be fully
committed to the project of rendering his own gender, biological sex, or sexual practice communication
ambiguous and (2) the reason why he bought the dress is likely not for identity presentation, but rather
for satirical purposes.
It could be argued that this ambiguity is reliant upon sex/gender dichotomy in and of itself, thus shifting the term “queer” back into a dependent relation with sex/gender dichotomy by proxy. If we had no conceptions of what behaviors or appearances are exclusively “male” or exclusively “female,” then we would be unable to introduce ambiguity in those realms, simply because ambiguity seems to rely upon knowing what to include or exclude from a particular category. However, even in a society that had no conception of what behaviors or appearances are exclusively “male” or “female,” there would still be something to base ambiguity in body presentation upon. There is a common epistemic assumption that all human bodies are recognizably anatomically standard and are controlled in accordance with these standards. I posit that these anatomical standards need not be merely based in gender norms; they could conceivably cover basic physiological assumptions about motion, comfort, or maintenance. These assumptions may resemble gender norms in content, but they are not synonymous with them. Thus, impression fluidity would not be completely reliant on gender dichotomy for ambiguity. Rather, it aims to show that ambiguity comes not only from complex social structures, but also basic epistemic assumptions about others in the world.

The Second Commitment: Critical Curiosity

Critical curiosity is the preliminary developmental process of exploring and acclimating to unfamiliar romantic and sexual performances, appearances, and behaviors. This process would not be identical for all agents, as it would depend on the agent’s own personal body of knowledge considering sexual acts, as well as sexual presentations of character or identity. Each engagement of critical curiosity would only be coherent as part of the developmental chronology of the queer agent. If the queer agent did not usually wear makeup and lipstick in public, a devotion to critical curiosity might manifest as re-tooling their own aesthetic to incorporate foundation, mascara, and a nice shade of lipstick. Similarly, if the queer agent typically engaged in the dynamic or “giving” portion of sexual
activity, a devotion to critical curiosity might manifest as working to experience the static or “receiving” portion of sexual activity.

Devotion to critical curiosity would reflect a curiosity about the totality of a particular identity or social exchange. It would aim toward educating the queer agent about the different angles, perspectives, or situations that each identity or social phenomenon possesses. Critical curiosity is distinct from impression fluidity, as it is not concerned with gathering behaviors, appearances, and sexual performances in order to construct an ambiguous style. It is concerned with the agent’s own personal development as a queer in society. Critical curiosity could certainly be the instrument of the “gender terrorist,” who seeks to destroy and subvert social assumptions of gender. Yet critical curiosity, as a concept, would more accurately complement someone who would perhaps approach the problems of oppressive structures in a more monastic sense. Through discipline, courage, integrity, and open curiosity, the queer novitiate employs critical curiosity in order to discover the diverse variety of dynamics and sensations that go along with appearances, behaviors, and sexual performances, thus becoming more confident in their own identity and growing in skill and understanding.

It is important to note that this curiosity would ultimately be limited by a sense of ethical awareness. As far as which particular ethic is best suited to the task of determining harm, that is outside of the scope of this paper and well into the primary project of ethics itself. Regardless, the “critical” part of critical curiosity would function as a method to discern the social consequences of sexual/romantic acts and dynamics, as well as whether or not these consequences were ethically harmful or beneficial. The queer agent would not be obligated to adopt oppressive social behaviors for the sake of development, but rather to explore them in an ethically responsible way. An example of this could be the power-play present within many consensual BDSM scenes or consensually and safely re-organizing the financial burden of a household. This would allow a further understanding of what fuels power
inequity, how it functions within the world, and perhaps with enough patience, how best to address it as a queer agent.

**Conclusion: Liberation through Devotion?**

I argued that “queer” should be thought of as a series of commitments: (1) the commitment to impression fluidity, which is a dynamic combination and re-combination of romantic and sexual performances, appearances, and behaviors that communicate gender or biological sex, in accordance with the queer agent’s current social desires; and (2) the commitment to critical curiosity, which is the ability to transform one’s behavior, appearance, and sexual practice in a way that inverts or reverses previously established behaviors, appearances, or sexual practices. What I have described thus far might seem too tall an order for a single person to conceivably fill. The gaze of others, factors of informal and formal sanctions, intimidation, humiliation, and physical harm seem to erode the possibility of realistically adopting this conception of queer identity. Yet the commitments to impression fluidity and critical curiosity are meant precisely as projects to assist the queer agent in realizing their queerness in public, in the face of such opposition. Impression fluidity need not begin obviously; it can be as subtle as a new movement style or a particular shirt that shows off different characteristics of one’s body. Critical curiosity also does not need to be extreme when beginning; it can be as simple as putting on nail polish or masturbating in a different way. The whole point to approaching queer identity as devotional commitment is for the sake of liberation, not merely from the tyranny of oppressive social structures, but also from the arbitrary restrictions we place on ourselves, because we do not believe our bodies to be sufficient to the purpose. The necessary value of queerness is liberation from body ignorance. By “body ignorance,” I mean ignorance of what our bodies are actually allowed to perform and appear as and, conversely, what our bodies are actually prevented from realizing.

Of course, this introduces a new tension: sufficiency. Where is the sufficient level of commitment to be recognized or count as queer? Who gets to decide this? As with every skill or study,
it is difficult to point to a precise point in a person’s development and state with absolute certainty that this is the point of mastery, where they ceased being a novitiate or student and began being a status proper. However, do we need mastery in order to count as queer, to graduate into queerness? Affiliation and status attainment does not only come from mastery. They can also come from shared struggle, shared values, and a mutual progression in sympathetic understanding. Given that a person authentically endeavors upon these commitments, the relevance of how far along one is in that sympathetic understanding seems diminished. The commitments to action seem satisfactory enough to count one among the queer community, as long as they are maintained and actually performed.

Works Cited