

by Jen Frye

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I asked members of the Fletcher Classes of 2022 and 2023 to answer the prompt: what does 'queer' mean to you?

Here are their responses.

Queer means free, liberating, and anything that an individual wants to be on the gender spectrum. Sexual identity and sexual orientation combine together in coining the term queer for me.

A member of the LGBTQ community.

One who identifies as anything other than cis/heterosexual.

Alex Thomas, MALD 2023

It means the freedom to express my bisexuality in a fluid and dynamic way without fear of being 'too much' or 'not enough' in both hetero and LGBT spaces. It gets complicated quickly if I have to use terms like lesbian, gay, or bi. I do use all of them interchangeably but really in my heart of hearts, I am bisexual, homoromantic (married to a woman, still bisexual). Queer feels so much easier. And it has the added bonus of making straight people uncomfortable.

Emily Dickinson wrote:
"Hope" is the thing with feathers That perches in the soul And sings the tune without the words And never stops - at all -

Being queer means being my whole-hearted self. It means loving all of my parts - the masculine energy, the feminine energy, and everything in between - and equally loving those parts of others, too. Being queer means authenticity and freedom. It means seeing the world (and other people) through a lens of honesty, transparency, light, and love. It means that my heart and spirit are what guide my decisions instead of the physical body I was born with and/or the expectations that others have for me as a result of being born in that body. With all due respect to Dickinson, I would modify this slightly to say, "queerness is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all."

Simultaneously, it is raised eyebrows and hushed remarks. It is the story of Matthew Shepard (and so many unnamed just like him); the images of 49 unalived people, lined up in rows, with a rainbow of flowers and burned candles and teddy bears alongside them to protect the afterlives of those killed at a nightclub in Orlando; it is the sobering fact that 2021 was the deadliest year (on record) for transgender people, most of whom were Black and/or Latinx. Being queer is, for so many people around the world, considered illegal. It is considered a sin. It is weaponized. It is fear.

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Queerness is the thing with feathers: it is colorful flags hanging from school windows and stickers pasted onto water bottles and laptop cases. It is a set of parenthesis at the end of a professional signature and hand-written signs reading, "free Mom/Dad hugs." It is Lil Nas X and Frida Kahlo and RuPaul and Leonardo da Vinci and King Princess and so many more. It is watching the Fab Five do their thing when I can't sleep and having the opportunity to sit in a leadership class and listen to the first female dean of the Fletcher School casually talk about her queer family. Queerness is community. It is hope. It is love.

Knowing that gender norms are artificial and rejecting them in identity, social or bodily expression, and/or life choices.

Gabrielle Robertson, MALD 2022

Queer to me is whatever queer means to a queeridentifying person. It's therefore flexible. Queer is a sort of catch-all term covering non-cishet identities.

'Queer' describes everyone who doesn't fit the standard cishet-wanting sex model; it means "different from the mainstream sexuality/gender discourse". Of all the beautiful and wonderfully specific alphabet soup labels, 'queer' feels like the truest and best umbrella term, and using it fosters a sense of community across diverse, specific identities, because in the end we're all excluded in some way and the best way to fight back is to embrace our power together and make our own home and way of being. 'Queer' (both the word and its meaning) is beautiful, wonderful, reclaimed: a shout against close-mindedness and 'normality' and 'fitting in' to reclaim our space, our power, and ourselves.

Nonconformity to binary gender or orientation norms.

My uncle Jacques who died of complications related to AIDS in 1994. He was my favorite uncle that I never knew. I miss him so much.

For me, being queer means that I refuse to exist within the rigid boundaries set by society.

Sam Bonelli, MALD 2022

Identity.

- 1. A word you should not use if you're not
- 2. For me, and a few fellow members of the community in my circle, it tends to be a catch-all term for those who, like me, are averse to firm labels. I see it as a reclaimed term frequently used to denote belonging in the LGBTQIA+ community without connoting membership in a hard, specific category. I self-identify with the term, but I find great difficulty in agreeing on specific definitions with Queer friends.

The removal of traditional boundaries of categorization.

Not heteronormative, breaking against the norms expected upon us by society to be straight, cisgendered.

Any non-heteronormative identity. Any identity that deconstructs society's norm.

Being queer means not understanding what's different about you until other people start to treat you differently. Being queer means being free when the world attempts to define you and box you in. Being queer means being part of a family of other human beings struggling to exist but who are also thriving, growing, and laughing together.

Different.

Queer means not conforming to the binary as defined by the culture around an individual. As for queer culture, it's a collective of these many expressions.

To me, queerness is a product of othering in straight, heteronormative spaces. I do think that queerness is innate, too, but I feel it most strongly in spaces in which I feel that I do not belong, or in which I am made to feel different or even broken. For me, Queerness is a reclaiming of that space - of individual comfort and balance with my personal identity in those spaces, in ways the subvert traditional heteronormative expectations. Because if I am not welcome or do not 'fit', why should I try to? Queerness is subversive resistance to an often unwelcoming world.

Anyone who is not straight/gender binary conforming but unsure what to label themselves as.

Shivi Thakur, MALD 2023

This might be controversial, but I have used queer as an overarching term that includes everyone on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum without people having to pick one label for themselves.

Queer:

Noun: of or pertaining to forms of sexuality and sexual expression that are not heteronormative; LGBTQ Adjective: different from the norm; not in the majority; unique; odd; strange; gay Verb: to apply a sexuality-based lens to something; to make something 'less straight'

People whose sexual orientation is not heteronormative.

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