

How I Became a Queer Heterosexual

by Clyde Smith (1997) For "Beyond Boundaries," An International Conference on Sexuality, University of Amsterdam, July 29-Aug 1, 1997 (1)

This is the story of how I became a queer heterosexual. It begins in North Carolina where I spent most of my life till I was twenty-nine years old. There I developed a flexible conception of gender and an openness to others' sexual orientation but held on to binaries of male and female, hetero and homo. The bulk of my story focuses on a three year period spent in San Francisco where I was immersed in a queer milieu. There I learned a great deal about further possibilities for sexual and gendered identity that went beyond rigid binaries. Much of this learning occurred in queer territory and led to my alignment with that identity yet my initial inability to claim such a title. I close with my experiences after leaving San Francisco and my eventual coming out as a queer heterosexual. Though this account follows a linear path through time, I know my development to be complex, unpredictable and not fully reproduceable. The story of how I came to claim the identity of a queer heterosexual, with its neatly fitted details, could only be written in retrospect. As my story unfolds I will relate what a queer heterosexual might be but I must begin by clarifying my use of the word queer. I draw on Keith Hennessy's definition from a pamphlet entitled, "Addressing the Queer Man's Role in the New World Anarchy and the Future of the Men's Movement in the dis/United States": *Queer: an umbrella term which embraces the matrix of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the not-exclusively- heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. Queer includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transvestites/transgenders, the radical sex communities, and many other sexually transgressive (underworld) explorers. (1992, p. 11)* While I will not reveal my own practices, I include myself in this broad definition with the modifier of heterosexual following queer. Though one might think of such a term as simply relating to sexuality, the emergent use of the term queer also indicates radical notions regarding gender. In both aspects, queer emerges from the opposition to and subversion of binaries of sexuality such as hetero/homo and of gender such as male/female. My understanding of queerness includes Kate Bornstein's redefinition of transgender as "transgressively gendered" and her call for a gathering of queer forces "that would include anyone who cares to admit their own gender ambiguities . . . that includes all sexualities, races and ethnicities, religions, ages, classes and states of body" (1994, p. 98). This redefining of transgender is another articulation of queerness as it has emerged in the 1990's. My story focuses on the experiences and encounters I had that formed a curriculum in queer identity encompassing both sexuality and gender. **NORTH CAROLINA** In North Carolina I learned much that laid a foundation for my experiences in San Francisco. At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where I studied dance and theater arts, I encountered a wide variety of gay men yet also spent much time in dance classes where I was the only male. Most of my teachers at that time were either women or gay men. This experience resulted in my growing to accept homosexuality as a reasonable orientation and expanded my sense

of gender possibilities in that movement choices did not have to align themselves with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. After college, in Raleigh and Durham, North Carolina, I made art on a community level with a commitment to left political activism. I read about and discussed feminist theory and practice. This activity included dialogues with lesbian women and led me to a critique of male dominance, white supremacy and heterocentrism. Though earlier I approached sexuality and gender as personal choices within a restrictive social setting, at this point I began to recognize the political nature of such choices. However I also developed a politically correct attitude about gender and sexuality. This attitude required a rejection of what I considered traditionally masculine movement choices including strong, forceful action on my part. It also meant that certain forms of sexuality such as SM, even in consensual adult relationships, was simply wrong and reinforced dominant ideologies of oppression. In the mid 80's, during a year of movement studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, I began to reclaim aspects of my moving self that I had rejected as a form of machismo. This learning happened in a strong group of women where again I was the only male. There I regained a sense of the flexibility of gender and rejected the rigidity of both hegemonic and politically correct gender roles. Yet, for the rest of my time after my return to North Carolina, I held on to restricted notions of sexuality. My beliefs were to be radically altered in San Francisco. **SAN FRANCISCO** In the summer of 1989, as I was about to turn thirty, I moved to San Francisco which I experienced as a life laboratory for the exploration and social re/construction of sexuality and gender. Shortly after I arrived I attended a trailblazing conference organized by and for bisexuals that awakened me to their marginalized status in both gay and straight discourse. Neither one nor the other, bisexuals resist the binary restrictions society attempts to impose upon them. In claiming such a destabilizing identity bisexuals establish a feature of queer terrain. The conference and related reading sensitized me to the prejudices faced by bisexuals as well as providing an early lesson in the broader possibilities for sexual identity. After a few months, I joined a men's dance company called The High Risk Group, directed by a long time friend Rick Darnell, and began to make a place for myself in San Francisco. I was the only hetero identified member of a company that performed primarily in alternative art spaces and at gay and lesbian events. Through The High Risk Group I gained entry into social settings with which many people, whatever their sexual identity, are totally unfamiliar. My experiences with The High Risk Group are at the core of my discoveries regarding sex and gender. This was the only time I felt like an integral part of a group of gay and bisexual men. Of course, this integration did not occur immediately. The first months were a testing period to see if I would stay with the group which faced many interpersonal and organizational obstacles. Because we were a small group and often danced in difficult physical situations--in clubs, on sidewalks and in other non-traditional settings--we grew to know each other very well. The other members of the company, whose membership shifted periodically, gradually revealed more of themselves as I showed myself open, nonjudgmental and

generally intrigued with their behavior. Their self revelations usually took narrative form including both anecdotal references to and lengthy accounts of sexual experiences. These stories educated me into the world of radical queer sex in San Francisco which includes but is not limited to group activities, anonymous encounters, exhibitionism, SM and other pursuits counterposed to the so-called vanilla sexuality of most hetero and homo citizens. Such practices expand sexuality into other dimensions "devoted to intensifying the act of sex itself" in which one "make[s] use of every part of the body as a sexual instrument" (Foucault, 1988, pp. 298-9). My education deepened as I asked for more specifics or inquired about technical details from the use of cockrings to safe sex practices in extreme situations. Though one may think of San Francisco as a debauched playground where everyone indulges in erotic experimentation, such activities seem more a limited but highly visible aspect of Bay Area culture, even assuming that what is visible is only a small part of the overall activity. I also knew gay men who found much of what my friends were into rather disturbing. The transgressive elements of their activities is one aspect of queer as a category other than gay, though queer is certainly grounded in homosexual opposition to hetero hegemony. Of course, the original appropriation of gay as a term was much more powerful than its current usage. (2) My friends practices are another way in which queer expands sexuality and destabilizes hetero/homo binaries. My understanding was also extended by the traditional form of information dispersal known as gossip. Over time I discovered that many of the people I met in the alternative arts scene had various kinks that one might not identify without behind the scenes knowledge. This devoted couple were swingers, that straight-identified person was on his knees at the Church of Priapus and so forth. Gossip provided a glance backstage at the behavior of people I knew only casually. Though gossip allows for a high degree of inaccuracy and certain of my cohorts had well deserved reputations as unreliable narrators, I began to piece together a sense of what was not visible in a city where so much was already on display. Not only was I learning that things are not as they seem and that human sexual activities are complex in ways that go beyond labels such as gay and straight but that many if not most of us have unrevealed potentials for experimentation. Perhaps in a restrictive society there are many who would not claim queerness but have many queer aspects in their practices. But much was not hidden. I saw many performances in addition to other artworks that were a part of the emergence of queerness. Elsewhere I have written on men's performance in San Francisco including the work of The High Risk Group and of Keith Hennessy, Jules Beckman and Jess Curtis (Smith, 1995 & 1996). These performances explored various possibilities for male existence and included much queer material, particularly in the work of Rick Darnell and increasingly in Keith Hennessy's work. But of all the performances I saw it was Kate Bornstein's play "Hidden: A Gender" (3) that caused me to begin a serious questioning of binary gender. "Hidden: A Gender," which I saw fairly early in my time in San Francisco, was written and directed by Kate Bornstein and performed by Bornstein, Justin Bond and Sydney Erskine.

This production had a man playing a young girl who discovered she was biologically male (Bond), a woman playing a man who had once been a woman (Erskine) and a male-to-female transsexual (Bornstein) playing a man. "Hidden: A Gender" problematized gender in a way that emphasized its constructed nature and undermined biological assumptions. More than any other art work I experienced in San Francisco, this show really pushed me towards an understanding that gender is socially constructed. But the implications went beyond simply analyzing the construction of gender to offering radical possibilities for creating new gender identities. This show also introduced me to a new understanding of transgender behavior and an expanded notion of the drag queen. Justin Bond, one of the performers, was a drag queen who I would see at various events or in the local media. I only saw him perform in "Hidden: A Gender" but he was a noticeable presence wherever he appeared. Whether Justin was in full drag or less transgender wear there was always a femme elegance about him. His presence and way of being in the world helped me to understand that drag was not always about appearing to be the opposite sex. In fact, I rarely saw most of the drag queens I came to know in anything like the popular media image of crossdressers. While some of them performed in that sort of drag, I knew most of them in more boyish wear, yet their way of being signalled transgender identity. These encounters and friendships caused me to realize that transgender behavior was not so much about crossdressing as about genderfuck. In a recent letter my queer friend Jonathan Meyer explained his conception of genderfuck: *[Genderfuck] has at least 2 meanings for me--the first, more obvious, is fucking with gender--distorting, twisting, inverting, playing with, challenging--but still (potentially) retaining and honoring the beauty in any expression of gender/sexuality, etc. . . . But the other is fucking gender: making love to gender . . . it is as much a source of inspiration, joy, anguish, beauty, & entrapment as any other aspect of human existence & human culture. (personal correspondence, August, 1996)*

The concept of genderfuck opens queer further to the playful possibilities of destabilizing rigidly gendered boundaries. My own awareness was expanded by the wide variety of genderfuckers I encountered in my daily life in San Francisco.

Of course, all these experiences caused me to wrestle with my own identity. Though a brief label cannot sum up human experience, still I desired a term that at least referenced my own complex nature and my kinship with these folks. At this time queer was just emerging as a term for militant gay/lesbian/bi/transgender activists and appearing in the media through public actions by such groups as Queer Nation. Though Keith's definition of queer includes me, I had not yet read his pamphlet. Queer still seemed too strongly identified with same-sex sexuality for me to claim it. Consequently there was no ready label for my identity and so I settled for considering myself a fellow traveler in the queer revolution.

AFTER CALIFORNIA In the fall of 1992 I left San Francisco to become a graduate student in dance and performance studies. Along the way I

discovered an article by Ann Powers in the Village Voice in which she discussed the emergence of the "Queer Straight, that testy lovechild of identity politics and shifting sexual norms" (1993, p. 24). At first glance this was the idea I was looking for. Her definition of inclusion in the queer world did not require "the fundamental acts of intimacy that ground homosexual identity" rather she spoke of "the projection of a queer attitude [as] enough to claim a place in homosexual culture." This form of "passing" becomes "a passage into a whole new conception of the self." Yet Powers' definition of queerness is ultimately grounded in same-sex sexuality and so she felt she could not "claim a wholly queer identity." Yet reading all this planted a seed and inspired the possibility of another hybrid, not the oxymoronic queer straight, but the queer heterosexual who is queer without having to pass for homosexual. My Master's thesis (Smith, 1995), written at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, focused on an evening of men's dance called "Mandala." This work was created and performed by Keith Hennessy, Jess Curtis and Jules Beckman, then the male members of Contraband, a San Francisco based dance/performance company. When I was gathering material about this show, Keith passed along the aforementioned pamphlet in which I encountered his definition of queer. Though I did not speak of it publicly, I began to think of myself as a queer heterosexual. However I did not come out as such until I reached my next institutional home, Ohio State University. At Ohio State, in a collaborative unpublished project with physical educator and sport historian Gary Joseph, while tracing how I came to understand gender as a realm of multiple possibilities, I identified myself as a queer heterosexual. Though this maneuver frightened me, it also felt like the right thing to do. I contextualized this label with Keith Hennessy's definition, Ann Powers' concept of the queer straight and the work of Kate Bornstein as well as my own immersion in queer culture. The juxtaposition of the terms queer and heterosexual startled those in attendance at our presentation and led to a discussion of both terms and their combination. From that discussion it became clear that this juxtaposition was a powerful device to shake up established notions about the boundaries of queerness and of heterosexuality. Back when I was first dancing with The High Risk Group in San Francisco, I publicly identified myself as straight out of insecurity as much as any stated reason. Once I recognized what I was doing I stopped looking for opportunities to proclaim my heterosexuality except when the point needed to be made that straight and gay men could work together. At these moments such an intervention was an attempt to trouble the hetero/homo divide while maintaining my own sense of identity within this particular group. Claiming queer heterosexuality is an extension of that earlier positionality as I now pursue more individual work. This maneuver also allows me to remain connected to queerness in environments that are less supportive than San Francisco. I claim the identity of queer heterosexual in order to further my own desires for a world of multiple possibilities rather than as a means of benefiting from queer chic. Such a world would be one in which we are not restricted by binaries of sex and gender or by the balkanization of identity groups. Yet we would not erase difference and would respect

the need for boundaries as deemed necessary for individual and group autonomy. Such a world would allow for the "mobility" that Leo Bersani speaks of in *Homos* (1995) which "should create a kind of community, one that can never be settled, whose membership is always shifting . . . a community in which many straights should be able to find a place" (p. 9). Temporarily at least, I have a home in the shifting community of queerness as a queer heterosexual.

FOOTNOTES¹ A related version was later published in *Straight With a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, edited by Calvin Thomas for University of Illinois Press, 1999. It's available from Amazon.² With the emergence of Gay Liberation in the late 1960's, the term gay came to mean, as Michael Silverstein recounts, "far more than the original fact of our homosexuality." (in Pleck & Sawyer, 1974, p. 107) For Silverstein, "Gayness is revolutionary because it requires the end of capitalist society and the creation of a society in which Gay people can live." (p. 122)³ "*Hidden: A Gender*" was originally performed in November, 1989 at Theater Rhinoceros in San Francisco. The text has since been published in Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*. (1994)

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