



2-3-2019

The Rapid Evolution of Queer Language

Elijah Cormier
Gettysburg College

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Cormier, Elijah, "The Rapid Evolution of Queer Language" (2019). *SURGE*. 337.
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The Rapid Evolution of Queer Language

Abstract

**This essay contains terminology that may be considered offensive to some. Names have been changed to protect identities.

“You remember Kayla?”

“Kayla Riddle?”

“Yeah. You know she’s a boy now?”

“Oh no shit! Not surprised, kinda saw that one coming.”

As I sit with a high school friend on back porch of her trailer, I quickly realize that most of my middle-class, leftist/liberal friends would jump on how we phrase Kai’s coming out. But sitting here, helping Amber figure out how much dope she’d need to sling to make rent this month, calling out mildly transphobic language isn’t a priority. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Education, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Information, language, LGBTQA Advocacy and Education, LGBTQIA, queer, Transgender

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

THE RAPID EVOLUTION OF QUEER LANGUAGE

[February 3, 2019](#)

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Monitoring the language we use is a full-time job. It’s easy enough to eliminate single words or terms from our vocabulary if that reasoning is easily understood. Don’t say “X” because it’s racist. Easy.

But when you are one of the few people who graduated from your high-school class and are now living in a single-wide trailer with 2 other queer girls your focus is on survival. In the hollow, fancy queer language is seen as elitist. As an example, I often call myself a “dyke”. A word that, not only has been used against me, but one that others have grown up with. Phrases like “Non-binary, post-T trans guy” would get me shut out quick. Sitting on Amber’s porch, calmly explaining the proper language to be used when discussing Kai’s transition will likely earn me a stern glare and a “you been up with them rich yankee faggots too long, man.” This may seem like I’m not doing my share to educate about evolving language, but there’s a time and place for everything.

Now, not all poor, southern, queer folks will use, what may be interpreted as, outdated language. Some take very close care to mentally update terminology when needed. However, in my experience, many of those have gone on at least to graduate high school, many even working on college.

When I’m back home from school, I work at a trans community clinic. Most of our clientele live in the suburbs. Growing up, they had a good education and many have supportive families. But it’s important

to remember that that's not everyone's experience. One day a woman came in and quietly asked in the thickest southern drawl if we could help her. I asked what she needed help with. "Well, I'm-I'm a man. And I don't wanna be. Not like one of them transvestite homosexuals but—" She paused not really knowing how to proceed. "That's fine." I said. I took down her name for our records then asked her pronouns. She blushed "I ain't do that good in school. I don't know what those is." I smiled at her, knowing the hurdles that'd come next. "Okay. Um, when people talk to you; do you want them to call you 'Sir' or 'Ma'am'?" She looked confused "I'm a boy—" I held her hand "I know. But it's your choice how people see you. You can pick what you're called. That's okay." With a lot of work, my coworkers and I were able to figure out exactly what she needed. Turns out, she thought we did conversion therapy, but upon meeting other trans women, she felt safe and began to feel "normal" for the first time in her life. I can only imagine if she'd had access to the newer language and more information, how much quicker this progression may have been. She explained that the last time she'd heard anything about "those Nancys" was in a shop radio reporting the assassination of Harvey Milk.

Language has evolved to use the words gays and lesbians instead of homosexuals. But some gay women think lesbian has too much of a male influence. However some lesbians want distinction from gay men and then bisexuals are different from pansexuals and—...It's hard not to become cynical. You try to evolve your language but the changes happen too fast and suddenly if you use the wrong words you're seen as a bigot and an asshole. It feels like you can't win. Like them fancy rich gays are mocking you. I've had great privilege with my education. If you are reading this, you most likely have had the ability to learn and edit your language as it evolves, even if you don't agree with it. But seeing other queer youth (queer being a word I NEVER use among older LGBTQ+ populations) snap at people who haven't had the same advantages is sickening. Not everyone follows the blogs you do, not everyone is even aware of the slight distinctions queer people have for their words. And while, yes, people will use outdated terms to get under your skin, that may not always be their intention.

I never want to put the burden of teaching on a marginalized group, but there are those out there that don't even know what they should be learning, or that there's something to be learned at all. So, if you're straight and/or cis, please educate yourself on queer terminology, do not place that burden on my queer siblings. But if you're queer? Check your privilege when dealing with those that have not had the same education, the same access, the same familial systems, the same financial situation, or even the same native language as you. Plenty of people mean well, but access to the ever-changing language may not be a reality.

For a glossary on Queer terminology, click [here](#).

Elijah Cormier '20
Contributing Writer