



Genderqueer

by Brett Genny Beemyn

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The term "genderqueer" began to be commonly used at the turn of the twenty-first century by youth who feel that their gender identities and/or gender expressions do not correspond to the gender assigned to them at birth, but who do not want to transition to the "opposite" gender. Characterizing themselves as neither female nor male, as both, or as somewhere in between, genderqueers challenge binary constructions of gender and traditional images of transgender people.

Genderqueers use a wide variety of terms to describe themselves, including transboi, boydyke, third gendered, bi-gendered, multi-gendered, androgyne, and gender bender. Sometimes they refuse to attach a label to their gender identities at all, feeling that no one word or phrase can adequately capture the complexities of how they experience gender.

Since Christine Jorgensen made international headlines in the early 1950s for having a "sex change," the dominant model of transgender identity development has involved individuals who recognize themselves at a young age as a gender different from their birth gender, struggle to understand these feelings, and after years of shame and denial, begin to accept themselves. Typically in mid-life they take hormones and have gender confirmation surgeries to align their outward appearance with their inner sense of self.

But in the last decade, there has been a fundamental shift in how many transgender people conceive and express their gender identities, as demonstrated by the increasing number of young trans people identifying as genderqueer.

Trans youth today, who have access to information on the Internet, see a growing number of transgender images in popular culture, and benefit from the political and social gains made by previous generations of transgender activists, are much less likely than transgender people who grew up in the 1960s to mid 1990s to feel that they are the "only one." As a result, trans youth in the 2000s may acknowledge and embrace their transgender identities more quickly and may depend on each other, rather than the medical profession, for support and validation.

Many trans youth also do not believe that they need to transition entirely or at all in order to be "real" men or "real" women. Refuting the idea that one's genitalia is the defining aspect of one's gender, they may take hormones, but not have any surgeries, or they may have a breast augmentation or reduction procedure, but not genital surgeries, or they may reject medical intervention altogether.

Some trans youth may seek to blur gender boundaries, such as by having an androgynous appearance or by wearing both "male" and "female" clothing. Thus, while genderqueers commonly refuse to conform to traditional (trans)gender expectations, there is no one way to enact or express a genderqueer identity.

For much of the 1990s, the term "transgender" was often shorthand for "transsexual," but the "transgender" umbrella is increasingly recognized as including a myriad of genderqueer, and other gender-diverse,



In *Question Mark* (2008), artist and activist Pilar Gallego asks "What is my Gender?". Image courtesy Pilar Gallego. Copyright © 2008 Pilar Gallego.

identities. And as more and more people identify as genderqueer, the less society will be able to foster and enforce a male/female gender dichotomy.

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About the Author

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.