



Labels: are lesbians gay?

"The learned man hath got the lady gay."
— Shakespeare, *Pass. Pilgr.* 225

by Dennis Peterson

Now that the new Steering Committee is in the process of forming, it is appropriate to reexamine the Lesbian and Gay Pride Week vs. Gay Pride Week controversy. In 1982 I wrote an article about the use of lesbian/gay in general. I disliked the usage on several grounds. When I served on the LGP '83 Steering Committee I was the only one to vote for Gay Pride instead of Lesbian and Gay Pride. I would like to present the article again in a slightly altered form as a springboard for discussion and close with an explanation of why I now think LGP is preferable, although I still shun the expression lesbian/gay.

As a struggling poet, mainly struggling to be a good one, I rejoice when I find a person who can pick just the right word to express a thought: not words that are flowery, scholarly, in, or shocking, necessarily, but words that make me ask myself, why did the person say it just that way and no other? I have become irked by that new hybrid beast, the lesbian/gay, which rears her/his androgynous head with increasing frequency in activities, organizations, and speech patterns. I would like to share some thoughts engendered by this phrase, which may be helpful in promoting greater exactness in the labels we apply to our gay sisters and brothers.

Group labels are more than words we coin to identify; they have history, tone, and exclusivity. The history of a group label imposed

from without is usually a mixture of insult and misunderstanding. "Chretien" (French for "Christian") was originally an insulting pun on "cretin" (idiot). Because Columbus blundered onto this continent in search of India, he called the native population "Indians." The tone of a group label sets a mood: homosexual, lesbian, gay, fairy, queer, dyke, faggot — the mood shifts from clinical through human to derogatory. Tone changes through history: to call a person "black" and not "colored" would have angered most members of that group in earlier times. Tone changes with speaker: a gay might call a fellow member a "queer" in good humor. Tone changes with situation: a gay might alter tone of voice and show hostility by saying "queer." Tone is subjective: one individual might prefer to be called "hearing impaired" to "deaf," another might feel just the opposite. Some group labels have exclusivity, that is, they are used to label all people that are not in "the" group: barbarian (originally meaning non-Greek), gentile (non-Jew), infidel (non-Muslim), or straight (non-gay).

Minorities have adopted special labels for themselves as part of their process of liberation, let me call them identity labels, finding the labels applied to them by outsiders offensive and inaccurate. Tone is improved when we speak of "native Americans" instead of "American Indians" which when thoughtfully considered is a laughable hybrid. "Native Americans": history is appealed to, stressing that they were here before us. "Native Americans": we are reminded of our exclusivity since they have been given so little say in determining America's policies. Identity labels, when picked with care, can say a good

deal.

Let us consider "lesbian/gay" using the criteria of history, tone, exclusivity, and, a new one, specificity, which we shall define when the time comes.

History

"Lesbian is derived from Sappho of Lesbos, a Greek lyric poet who lived about 600 BC and wrote about women with such intensity of emotion that it appears that she was sexually involved with them. I have not found a work that traces the history of the word, but the Oxford English Dictionary gives the first example of its use by quoting a work from 1870. The related term "Sapphism" was also used, appearing in a work from 1890. I have heard that the term was coined because of a misunderstanding of the term homosexual. "Homo" in "homosexual" comes from the Greek, where it means "the same" (hence, "sexually attracted to the same sex"), and not from the Latin, where it means "man" (and consequently "attracted to men"). The latter meaning would make straight women "homosexual." John Boswell traces the history of "homosexual" and "gay" in *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*. Despite echoes of antiquity, "homosexual" was coined by a physician named Benkert in 1869. It was meant to be a clinical term to replace "invert," which implies that such individuals invert the typical sexual roles, men "playing" women, and vice versa. Most of the terms competing at the time were even more grotesque. "Gay," on the other hand, in the form "gay" was used in Provençal in the thirteenth century, to describe the laid-back behavior of female and male

courtesans. "Lesbian/gay" links words of a very different history.

Tone

The etymology of "lesbian" gives it a literary if not clinical tone. The tone of "gay" is colloquial and implies looseness, as in "gay bachelor" or "gay Paris," one of the reasons some lesbians do not want to be labelled gay. This does not mean that "gay" need have only negative connotations. The lightness of its tone could imply the loosening of gender roles seen in the homosexual community. Not just in sexual performance, but in gestures, clothing, and speech patterns. There is no term for gay men that has the same tone as "lesbian." At least a phrase like "dyke/faggot" would be consistent in tone, but perhaps too inflammatory. (I belonged to a social group called DAFT: Dykes and Faggots Together.)

Exclusivity

"Lesbian" has typically been used to exclude anyone who is not a homosexual woman. "Gay" has been used to exclude anyone who is not homosexual, man or woman. "Lesbian/gay" therefore has unbalanced exclusivity. We can see this particularly in the phrase "lesbians and gay men." Why is it necessary to specify men if lesbians are not gay? If a large number of Black women decided to resurrect the term "Negress," a parallel expression would be "Negress/Black," a more obvious misbalance of tone and exclusivity, since a "Negress" is Black, just as a lesbian is gay. If a gay woman chooses to emphasize her double burden as gay and as woman by calling herself a lesbian