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Don't Say Gay With a "Q" (and Why I Do): Thoughts About Queerness

by Tara Kulak

I've been jumping into "queer" content recently, at full force. This is not because I am uninterested in other things, but because I haven't been able to focus on much else for a while. Though I have identified as nonbinary since entering high school, almost eight years ago, I still feel the need to prove that this is "real". This is a "real" identity, that being nonbinary has indigenous roots, that third genders exist in every culture aside from Western, that a lot of sex-dependent hormones are actually derived from your gut and not your brain, and what does that mean, and is gender even a real thing? Discussion around "queerness" is stifled, labeled as arbitrary and inappropriate, not something others care to know.

There are plenty who care, though, and some of them are writers, editors, and media creators. I have picked up "The Pink Line: Journeys Across The World's Queer Frontiers" by Mark Gevisser (2020) in search of a journalistic, global understanding of what it means to be "queer". I have picked up "A Year Without a Name" by Cyrus Grace Dunham (2019) to provide myself an intimate take on transmasculine "queerness". I have picked up "Gender Outlaw: Men, Women, and the

Rest of Us" by Kate Bornstein (1994) to read an established piece on gender and how it shifts over time. A few days ago, I listened to a new episode of the NPR podcast Code Switch "Spilling the T", an interview with D'Lo, writer of a one-man play presenting his experience of coming out as queer to their Sri Lankan family – it made me cry. Still, I can't help but feel like I need to prove myself to the world. These pieces are not full of MY words, therefore I am not yet valid as a "queer" community member. An even more powerful thought, I am not valid as simply myself: I cannot define what it means to be "queer".

I am doing what I always do before determining my own feelings and asking how everyone else around me feels. In the depths of my emails, I find my "coming out" email, the one that was mostly swept underneath the rug by the people that I sent it to. Let me share some of it here now.

"It has always made me feel inhibited to have a female body when trying to navigate the world. What is one to do when they never feel at home in their skin and cannot recognize themselves in the mirror? Familiar feelings are returning to me, trying to be myself and having my physicality confuse people when they perceive my ideas and my body at the same time. Often I feel invalidated.



painting by rachel ludall

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Rainbow Summer Rolls

No better way to celebrate this colorful community (and beautiful weather) with these crunchy, crisp, refreshing rice paper rolls. Don't like the texture of rice paper? Swap it out for a lettuce cup or even a tortilla. Recipe by Syd Morrison.

Mix-Ins:

- Red pepper, thinly sliced
- Orange carrot, thinly sliced
- Yellow pepper, thinly sliced
- Cilantro, roughly chopped
- Mint, roughly chopped
- Thai basil, roughly chopped
- Scallions, thinly sliced
- Sprouts, microgreens or lettuce leaves

- Nori sheets, torn into thin strips
- Purple cabbage, thinly sliced
- Optional: Avocado slices, tofu slices, cooked mushrooms.

Ginger Peanut Sauce

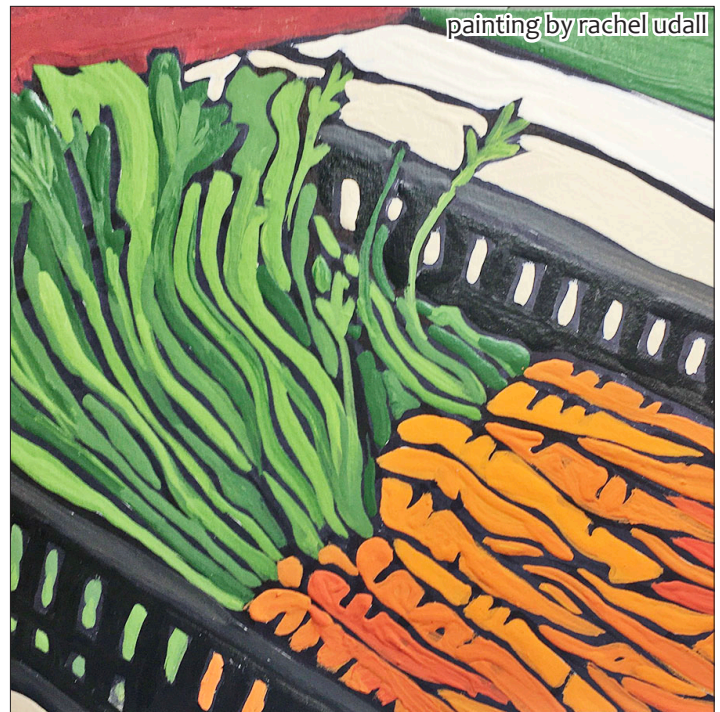
- 1/2 cup peanut butter
- 2 tbsp Tamari or soy sauce
- 1/2 tbsp miso paste
- Juice of 1 lime
- 2 tbsp of pickled ginger liquid
- 1 tbsp Maple Syrup
- 1 tsp-1tbsp Sriracha or Sambal Olek or 1 chopped Red Chili
- 1 tbsp Sesame Oil
- Splash hot water
- 1 clove Garlic, chopped
- 1 thumb size piece of Ginger, grated

1. Mix all sauce ingredients in jar to combine. (Make extra, trust me.)
2. Prepare rice paper rolls according to package instructions, pile on mix ins for a delicious rainbow effect.
3. Roll bottom up over filling, fold in sides, and roll up until closed. Keep making them until all of your mix ins are gone!
4. Dip in Savory Peanut Sauce, serve with kimchi and pickled ginger, and enjoy!

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While I disagree with general gender roles and the concept of the sex binary for cisgender people to begin with, I still deviate from my understanding of gender. ... This is both confusing and complicated, and I am on my own still navigating my experience of gender. Why does it matter to express gender? Why can't I be happy with my body as it is and refrain from putting a set of expectations and limitations on it because of its make-up?"

My year-old email touches on something that I've been hyperfixated on recently: why does it matter that I am "queer"? The answer might be "because that's who I am", but some might think the answer is "it doesn't". Everyone loves talking about identity, how they feel, what they like. When I talk about being "queer" to someone who doesn't identify with that word, there is a palpable ripple of discomfort between us. That word hasn't always meant what it does now, I know that. I ask you, reader: do you have adverse feelings towards this word? The late writer bell hooks defines queerness as "being about the self that is at odds with everything around [love/attraction] and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live." Queerness is to identity as identity is to being human. It is much bigger than the keysmash that is "LGBTQIA2S+", ever changing and growing, welcoming and inclusive -- there is space in being queer to not know, and to experiment. To simplify anything down to one letter in an acronym is limiting, just as society is to queer people already. I need to talk about being queer. It is relevant to



everything that I do. "LGBT issues" doesn't begin to define what I am, what my rights should be, and if how I express myself is "appropriate". I love being queer; to be asked why I have to use that word, why it matters, what it will prove to express myself this way -- all of these are questions I have been asked that make me doubt myself and feel invisible, or like a freak (in a bad way). I think queerness is relevant to everyone, though it might not be their identity. Discussion around it is vital to growth, and there's more queer content out there than ever before.

Reading (Rainbow) Recommendations

She Who Became the Sun by Shelley Parker-Chan

Set in 1300s China, this book follows the story of Zhu Chongba, the daughter of a poor peasant farmer who takes her fate into her own hands. Historical fiction with a little bit of magical realism and a lot of exploration of gender and the ways people can conform to gender, or not. A sweeping novel with an ending that stuck with me.

In the Dream House by Carmen Maria Machado

A memoir that delves deeply into a relationship gone wrong. Each chapter uses a different trope or style — haunted house, time travel, confession — and over the course of the book the essays

slowly reveal what happened, and why and how. Beautiful, very dark, and surprisingly funny. I read it in one sitting.

One Last Stop by Casey McQuiston

A lighthearted romance perfect for pride month. Great characters and setting, throw in a little time travel and some found family, and you've got a winner.

A Quick and Easy Guide to Queer and Trans Identities by Mady G. and Jules Zuckerberg

Queer imagination saves lives. Language changes all of the time. A Quick and Easy Guide to Queer and Trans Identities is a testament to both. Whether you're newly tuning into an inner-knowing,

you're looking to learn so you can show up more-informed for a loved one, or you're years past your first coming out and you love graphic nonfiction, perhaps this is a book for you. Cartoonists Mady G. and Jules Zuckerberg use comics featuring snails and adorable woodland creatures called Sproutlings to guide readers through the basics of the LGBT+ world. This slim resource, only 96 pages and small enough to fit in the side pocket on some cargo pants, covers essential topics like sexuality, gender identity, coming out, and navigating relationships. They really crammed a lot in there; you might need a magnifying glass.

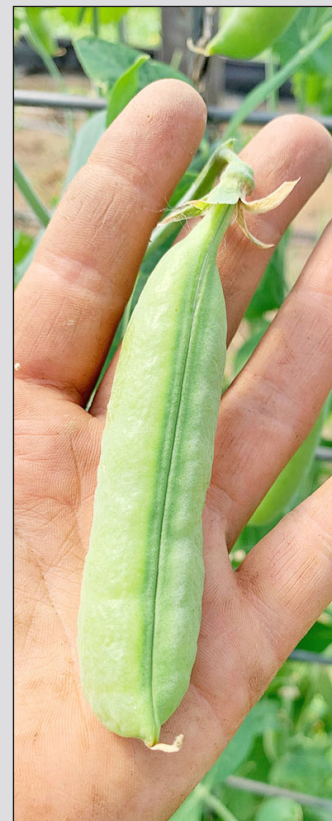
Ciara, she/they

Ciara has been working and growing and learning at PVF full time, year round since 2018. Loudoun-based with

infrequent appearances at Vienna. In the winter Ciara can be found in the high tunnels and in the summer you can find them out in the fields! Every year her

job is a little different, and this year they've been leading morning meetings, loading and unloading and loading and unloading trucks, weeding the cherry patch over and over, picking every kind of vegetable that we grow, trying not to rush through watering the greenhouse, checking the temperature in the cooler, and making lots of group chats with every combination of people who work in Loudoun so we can figure out what we're doing after lunch. Once a week they cook dinner for a group of ~10 people, so they're always cooking with whatever's abundant; she's found that as long as she's using fresh veggies, simple preparation lets the produce shine. This

year she grew peas in the tunnels, which was mostly successful except where a rabbit kept eating them down to the ground.



Meet Our Farmers (cont'd)

hc, they/he/she

hc is a queer and trans plant witch enthusiastically returning for a second season. Their labor hours are split between Potomac Vegetable Farms where they work amidst a mighty crew, and Second Spring Farm, with a decidedly much smaller team. Curiosity is hc's middle name, and they are almost always hungry to learn and explore more. They keep their eyes, ears and other senses open to queer ideas, delicious recipes, and face-to-face encounters with wild creatures (mostly bugs). In an effort to continue their herbal training after completing an intensive community herbalism program last year, hc is growing some medicinals like skullcap, calendula, and spilanthus. When hc isn't wearing their farming clothes, you might find them collaging, folding zines, bouncing on the trampoline or brewing their next batch of kombucha. They've spotted more than 13 four-leaf clovers over the past two months.



Tara, they/them

I came to PVF the summer of the pandemic, when everything was really wonky and protocol was constantly changing on the farm (with the CDC.) This is my third year on the Loudoun farm, located just minutes away from where I grew up and where I live now. I self-identify as a full blown local; I am pretty familiar with most of the DMV area as a whole, in addition to most of the upper half of VA itself. Going to school in Loudoun hasn't ever been gentle on who I am as a person, so finding the farm was one of my greatest blessings. I've established much of who I want to be and what I want out of my life here, and I couldn't ever write a long enough love letter to the farm community to convey how I feel. My love for people, my love

for the landscape and the mountains, my love for critters and creatures and everything green, all have grown here -- so I guess you could say I've grown up right here, too. There's a question of whether I eat our vegetables or not in the guidelines for writing our introductions... heck yeah I do. I eat almost everything we grow right out of the dirt, but I do sometimes have the patience to bring vegetables home and cook them. I love experimenting with food and it brings me a lot of joy whenever I have the opportunity to share a meal with this community. It also brings me a lot of joy to share a meal with myself here, eating cucumbers out in the field with my knife. I envision big goals for myself this year, like staying hydrated and trying to remind everyone around me to stay hydrated, too.