

“It’s so hard to

unlearn

this shit!”

and other thoughts on culture,  
sexuality, gender, and identity

a zine by clara atwell

# Contents

2 .....Interview Questions

3-4 .....Ell (he/they)

4-5 .....Wren (they/them)

5-6 .....Matt (he/him)

6-7 .....Kylee (they/them)

8-9 .....Callan (she/they)

# Questions

1. Using labels, how would you describe your gender and sexual identities?
  - How comfortable do you feel using these labels?
2. Are there other labels you align with? ie gay, queer, etc
  - What do these mean to you?
3. Have there been any labels that used to mean a lot to you that you no longer use?
4. How much do you think our cultural understanding of gender and sexuality has shaped your gender and sexuality?
  - Do you think your “natural disposition” or culture has played a greater role in shaping it?
  - Do you think that if you had been born in a different country/culture/ time period, you would identify in the same way?
5. Can you tell me about how your understanding of your identity has evolved?
6. Have you ever felt like the process of choosing/automatic labels has somehow confined or limited your expression?
7. Do you think the next cultural step of queer identities is to move away from the label entirely?
8. Have you ever felt like your behavior has contradicted your identity/sexual or gender expression?
  - How did this feel?
  - Why do you think it felt this way?
9. Do you view or experience your identity as a fixed thing?
10. Do you feel like the phenomenon of “coming out of the closet” accurately represents your experience understanding and communicating your identity?
11. Do you experience your gender and/or sexuality as a personal or political thing?

Ell (they/he)



**SEXUALITY/GENDER:** Queer

**TODAY MY GENDER IS ...**

- “incense smoke and oh what’s the slutty character from sex in the city — Samantha!”
- “a florist, the ocean, and sad like Mazzy Star”
- “the fluidity of the ocean”
- “Pussy Riot energy”

**OTHER LABELS:** Andro-fag, Girl-Boy, Boy-Girl

### ON THE LABEL QUEER:

“By using that word, [queer], for my sexuality, I was able to explore further with my gender, so it was this literal stepping stone. If I didn’t have that space, that word queer, I wouldn’t have further explored my gender at least in the timeline I did”

“I like gender queer because it gives a lot of space in what it means. I like the idea that I can exist within the binary — sometimes I feel like a boy — and then I also like how it gives space to sort of exist on another plane ... this other sort of dimension where I can create how I feel or create an identity literally out of my brain ... it’s like I can design my gender however I want.”



“We have these different words for gender and they pinpoint one specific color [in a palette], but in reality [gender] is this huge portrait that has so many shades and hues, and language puts this filter on it where you can only see certain ones.”

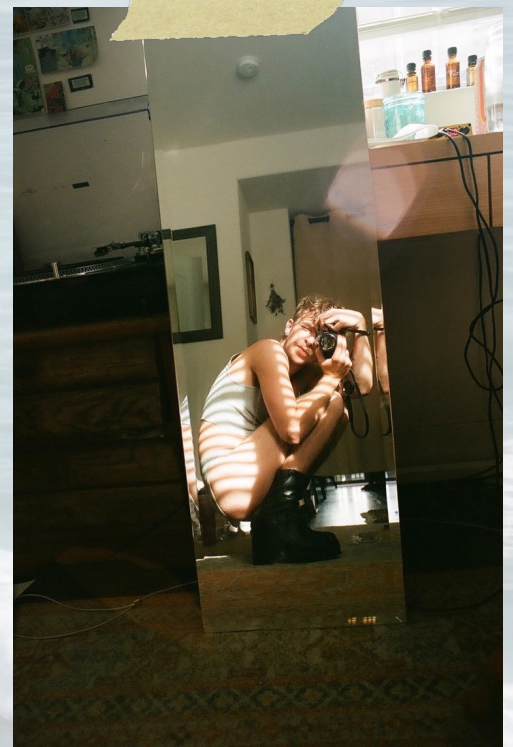
## ON LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND CULTURE:

“I love my femininity. I love my femme ... It’s something I didn’t love for a long time because of the way our society socializes us to view femininity, and I’ve grown to love it more. But, I’ve realized I’ve fallen into this other problematic mindset of associating it with sex only and fetishizing it.”



“I often think of my expression on the spectrum between masculinity and femininity, and I like mixing those two and fucking with them and trying to exist in this realm where I’m subvert-ing this binary. The reality is I’m still adhering to those in a lot of ways.”

“I talk about gender like it’s this very abstract thing, but it’s totally tied to our social world which is very real and lends itself to that meaning ... there’s nothing you can say exists in a vacuum. I can’t say that for my gender either. Even when I say there is this plane of existence that I like to explore, obviously what I’m creating is rooted in my experiences which are socialized by the world around me. But that doesn’t make them not real”



“I wore this fur coat when I first verbalized the name Ell. I have a lot of pieces of clothing that I tie my gender to ... I honestly should take photos of my closet every year and just be like ‘this is my gender journey.’”



# Wren (they/them)



**SEXUALITY/GENDER:** Lesbian

**OTHER LABELS:** Non-binary lesbian, non-binary, sometimes woman, gay

- **Gay:** “as a term used to connect with other gay people specifically”
- **Non-binary:** “means my experience of gender is unique to my situation, unique to being a lesbian particularly.”
- **Does not use queer:** “I don’t want there to be ambiguity, especially because men are so persistent”

## WHY LABELS ARE IMPORTANT TO WREN

“Distinctions matter within the community, but also outside the community because people’s experiences are different”

“Doing away with labels and just using queer just puts a bandaid over all [intra-community conflicts]. It’s a nice sentiment, but it’s not how interactions play out in the real world. I think it does a disservice to everyone involved to ignore those distinctions. However, I understand why other people like the label [queer]”

“I don’t have any doubts [about my identity], I don’t feel any fluidity, and even the fluidity that I do feel is encompassed in my identity.”

## IS THERE A WOMAN BEYOND MAN?

Over the past 10 weeks I have found myself frequently questioning what it means to be a gendered woman beyond men. Wren's experience understanding their identity within the context of being raised and automatically labeled female in our society, deeply connected to this. Messaging surrounding the female identity and attraction to men built their conception of womanhood. Although they knew they were attracted to women by the time they were 14 and actively participated in on-line gay culture through Tumblr, they took their attraction to men as a given due to how intrinsically our societal understanding of womanhood is bound to men. They tied the cultural narrative of butterflies and romanticization of violence to the feeling of nausea they would get when a man held their hand or kissed them. Our cultural trivialization and fetishization of female relationships led them to view kissing their female friends as "platonic intimacy." Our cultural view of sex and male pleasure led them to believe that not enjoying hetero-sexual sex as a woman was a universal. All of this led them to consider that they were asexual, identify as bisexual, and try to comprehend their identity through the split attraction model, before the possibility of not even being attracted to men crossed their mind. Since becoming confident in their lesbian identity, men, and the implications of the male gaze as a whole, have become an irrelevant part of Wren's life. With this, the meaning of the female label has lost weight in their life. While at a political level their upbringing leaves them connected to the female identity and experience, at a personal level their lesbianism defines their gender.

"Before I figured out that I was a lesbian, when I identified as bi, a lot of my feelings about being a woman and my understanding of being a woman was connected to my relationships with men of all kinds, even just as much as going to the store."

"[I used to be] very conscientious of my womanhood and my status as such. When I realized I was a lesbian, it took a little while for that to go away. But, once I fully stopped caring about men at any capacity ... I didn't really feel like there was anything left of the woman label that I could relate to."

Matt (he/him)



**GENDER:** Male

**SEXUALITY:** Straight

### DO YOU EVER THINK ABOUT YOUR GENDER AND SEXUALITY?

“When I was little, there were no thoughts or labels to [my gender and sexuality]. When I got older, it was just putting a label on it, but I didn’t feel like anything actually changed as I came to an understanding of all the different ways people identify. I feel like mine didn’t shift personally, it was just kind of putting a label on it.”

“I’ve definitely felt the climate shift while we’ve been becoming adults ... so I feel like our cultural understanding has definitely shaped [my understanding of gender and sexuality] a lot.”

**MASCULINITY:** “Masculinity is just kind of like testosterone. There’s things you associate with masculinity that you are taught from a young age and see as masculine things, like having big muscles, doing dude shit, and I grew up as a boy scout and everything. I was taught that these are masculine things to do: going camping, shooting guns, and that’s how my masculinity has been shaped from a young age.”

### GENDER LINES AND MASCULINITY

**Did you ever cross gender lines growing up with toys, dress, or hobbies?**

- “I liked pink for a minute”

**What about now?**

• “I fuck with cooking and baking. I feel like with the climate we are in it’s just so accepted. As a dude, if you want to do feminine things, it’s always seen as cool, it’s always positively received. It just kind of makes you less of a douchebag.”







**HAS FEAR OF SOMEONE CALLING YOU OR SOMETHING YOU DO "GAY" EVER LIMITED YOUR ACTIONS?**

“Growing up a lot of the homies would say gay stuff and act gay. I feel like our generation grew up with such an opposite stigma, going against that stigma, where a lot of people would just be like ‘nah bro it’s just like homiesexual”

**Example of “gay stuff”:**

“Damn bro you looking sexy today”



Kylee (they/them)



**GENDER:** Non-binary, Queer

**SEXUALITY:** Queer

- “I’m something else, but I’m not sure. For me it’s whatever feels right, the vibe ... what feels right or good, and the vibe is not feminine and the vibe is not masculine, so the vibe is somewhere in between.” and I never thought I wanted to do anything more to define that ... I don’t want to think about it that deeply”
- **Queer:** “a word that means exactly what you want it to mean”

### ON LABELS AND FLUIDITY:

Kylee talked a lot about the pressure that choosing labels and choosing the right label can have on someone. They often see young people defining their identities in “9 specific terms” who later experience a great amount of guilt or sadness for “being wrong” about their identities. As someone who embraces the queer label and the ambiguity within their own identity, this can often feel like unnecessary strife and guilt to put yourself through. To describe this phenomenon, they compared someone changing their identity labels with someone switching majors — an analogy apt for Cal Poly students. To them a major like engineering, with a clear cut path forward and glamour, represents the safety people experience inside the binary.

- “Just like if you are changing majors, you get so attached to the label ‘I’m an engineer’ and then if you think ‘what if I’m not an engineer.’ You get this feeling of guilt because you already told everyone you are an engineer.”
- “You can be attached to the idea of being queer and different. But, I don’t think you should do so much to be like ‘I’m one way’ because there is just so much guilt that comes with changing your mind ... that’s not healthy for people to be doing that.”
- “The lack of flexibility and fluidity that people have makes it hard ... Guess what people change, it’s kind of inevitable. You might never be right and it’s fine!”
- “It feels weird to break someone’s idea of who you are.”

“I was the good child, so I was allowed to break those social boundaries ... There’s this weird thing regarding what people will allow you to get away with if you are good at other things.”

“There is a certain degree of this feeling that I have to experience something in order to make my identity valid. However, there is also a certain amount of this gut feeling ... and it’s not gender euphoria per say, it’s more just a certain level of contentment when you find the right place to be.”

**“LETTING PEOPLE CHOOSE WHAT THEY ARE COMFORTABLE IN IS SO MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN HOMOGENEITY”**

Talking to Kylee it is clear that people’s willingness to sacrifice insignificant societal norms to accommodate them and other’s makes a huge impact. This is where the importance of allyship lies. We discussed their frustration with the number of gendered terms in our culture that only have hyper-formal gender neutral alternatives. Kylee expressed how frustrating the unnessesary degendering of things like folks to folx is when words like aunt and uncle still exist without a commonly used alternative

“People are so confused about things that are already not a problem, but no one is working on the things that are extremely gendered”

“There is so much room in our society for intersectionality”

Callan (she/they)



### ON THE LABEL WOMAN:

“As a lesbian and as a butch lesbian I feel a lot of alienation from traditional conceptions of womanhood — so much of what we consider to be woman is in direct relation to man — and since there is no part of my life where I prioritize men in any capacity, be that in my romantic or platonic relationships, I have a really hard time relating to womanhood”

“I am a woman in that I relate to women in many ways, I am a woman politically, I am a woman in that I love women more than anything else in the world and I think women are the most important thing in the world”

**SEXUALITY/GENDER:** Lesbian

**OTHER LABELS:** Non-binary lesbian, woman La Croix

- **Lesbian:** “For me the usage of the word lesbian is like, no don’t call me queer, I worked hard for this, I needed to unlearn some fucking shit for this, so I am going to enjoy it.”



“I think that all queer identities are hard to figure out ... but I do think that being raised a woman and being raised to value men no matter what and over everything else, to really fully let go of any sort of male validation and announce that you no longer care to value men is especially hard. And, in that struggle, to let go of centering men in every interaction creates a resiliency and power that becomes an unstoppable force. This is something that I love and admire about lesbians. They are women on their own terms. They refuse to shrink to make men comfortable. Their authenticity is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever witnessed.”

“In a lot of ways I feel like I have a public and private gender. In private, I feel more like a woman. When I’m with my girlfriend and we’re making dinner and she’s doing homework and humming to herself and I’m listening to a podcast, I’m simply a little lady in love with another little lady. If a man sees me as a woman, I would rather die.”



“I want women to see me as a woman, I want gay people to see me as a woman (I guess), but I want men to never see me and to never see me as a woman. I think that has more to do with the fact that I don’t want to be treated like a woman based on the way men treat women, but I like being treated like a woman with the way that women treat women.”