

CLOSING REMARKS

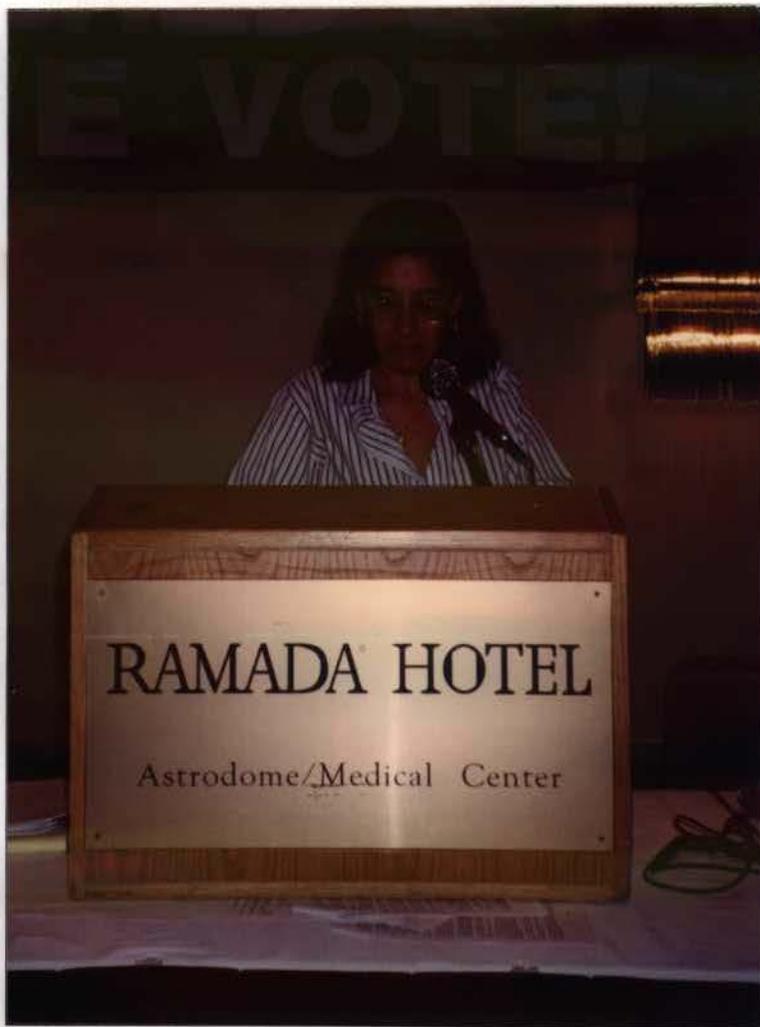
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Getting Possessive About the Term "Lesbian"

by *Elvia Arriola*

Several years ago, I was the member of a women's support group which was predominately lesbian. The group offered a "womanspace" for individuals who wanted to share their experiences, strength, and their hope as the survivors of rape and sexual abuse. On a weekly basis anywhere from 15 to 30 women of all racial ethnic and social backgrounds rented a meeting room from a community church. We knew each other by first name only, and shared stories of sexual victimization and abuse with the singular goal of healing themselves through mutual support.

As women revealed long-buried traumatic events, they also reflected on how the low self-esteem caused by the sexual abuse had resulted in failed relationships, lost jobs, depression, workaholism, and also repeated efforts to get one's life together. The sharing often evoked emotional responses as women recalled their own secrets of incest by their fathers, brothers, uncles, and male cousins. Realizing the source of their conflicted lives, they learned to express feelings they had repressed against their abusers and the families they had tried to protect or who had not believed them. Newcomers heard from women who had turned their lives around as they put an end to denial by ending abusive relationships, getting therapy, or ending the alcohol or drug dependency they had used to cover up their pain. In the company of other survivors, the women felt safe enough, sometimes for the first time in their adult lives, to weep or get angry, for in this safe space they trusted that their companions would not mock, negate, or minimize their feelings. Of course, the critical sense of safety was assured by the practice of someone standing guard at the door to make sure no man accidentally walked into the rented rooms. If that happened, all talk would suspend until the man was gone. This ground rule grew out of the plainly obvious fact that this was a meeting for women healing from sexual abuse by the men in their lives. Only an all-women atmosphere could guarantee an emotionally safe environment.



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Imagine then, the turmoil created in this "womanspace" when one day a tall, quiet woman who had shown up regularly at meetings for several weeks, suddenly came out to the group as a transsexual female. Not only that, she was a transsexual female who identified as a lesbian.

Suddenly, "Micki", who had simply appeared as an unusually tall, rather quiet and professionally dressed woman, looked very different to the group's members. Some of the women were too involved with their own issues to take in what had just happened. In the following weeks however, a few women, both lesbian and not, reacted strongly, sharing that they felt threatened by Micki's continued presence. Micki's feminine appearance bore witness to the wonders of modern medicine, but to some she was nothing but a fake. Since her revelation now explained that the slightly masculine build around the shoulders and neck meant this supposed "woman" was a man or at least had been born male. Further, Micki's self-confident demeanor betrayed that although she had given up her male identity, hints of her socialization as a privileged white male clearly remained. Micki's chosen identity as a woman posed another gender and sexuality enigma -- having castrated his penis and leaving his sexual orientation unscathed. The choice of a lesbian identity to express her (his) new identity as a woman, loving woman, communicated an unfamiliar sex and gender ambiguity. For some, the ambiguity only generated hostility and feelings of mockery by this once man's appropriation of a label -- lesbian -- which they felt belonged to "real" women.

In the conflict and confusion that surfaced for several weeks after her coming out, Micki faced both support and prejudice from fellow members of the incest survivor's meeting. Meanwhile, the opponents who sought recovery from specific forms of sexual abuse, involving male genitalia felt abandoned by their group, angry and enraged that not everyone agreed that Micki should leave. Too many individuals supported Micki to force a formal demand that she leave and not come back. The resisters expressed a sense of betrayal by the group's unwillingness to oust Micki -- whose crime was that she once had a penis and now she was neither truly female, nor woman nor lesbian -- at best she was not a man. Eventually, the conflict led to a split as Micki's resisters formed their own group and limited membership to women who had been born into a female body. Micki eventually left the group.

I have resurrected my memories of the events surrounding Micki to introduce what has consistently been treated as a controversial issue by some lesbian/gay and feminist audiences. That it is significant theoretical task for lesbian/gay and/or feminist scholars to connect their theorizing to the efforts of transgender scholars and activists who advocate the creation of a society without rigid categories of identity and desire.

Micki's identity defied the socially created categories of identity and desire. Her identity not only invited prejudice, but also confusion, as women divided on questions of how to maintain group stability, support Micki, address the concerns of the outraged and fearful women, and determine what the group had intended when it adopted the ground rule "no men allowed". One group voiced intolerance of the opposition to Micki's continued membership and argued that her opponents had gotten too possessive about the labels "lesbian woman" and "female." But, this was not a room for theory. It was a room created for the realm of emotions, which defy the logic of labels and categories. And yet, the expression of that room in particular, the feelings of irrational fear and prejudice which split the group, illustrate a microcosm of the societal confusion that is generated when, without warning, one is confronted by individuals whose transgression of society's gender laws and assumptions forces a re-examination of the -- of the meaning of such labels such as "man", "woman", "lesbian", "female", "male" and so on.

Whether Micki ever really understood or even accepted as legitimate the view that some women could not feel safe in her presence is not the immediate focus of this inquiry. By leaving to form

another support group, Micki opened the door for healing from incest and sexual abuse to other transsexual females. The woman who separated, did not have to examine the source of their fears.

No one thought to ask whether some of their reactions to Micki, based upon preconceived notions of gender or sexuality might have stemmed from the same hetero-patriarchal value system, which accounted for their sexual victimization. And certainly no one felt the need to understand or address the unique form of gender oppression that leads an individual to such a drastic measure as sex reassignment surgery. The fact that Micki's recovery would involve stories of how from early childhood she/he struggled with society's expectations of his/her assigned gender identity was of little interest to her opponents. Their resistance seemed to be a mere continuation of the rigidity based on gender polarization, which had formed a part of his socialization as a male/boy born into this culture. That is to first deny and then to channel or redirect a child's experience of gender dissonance with discipline, judgment and shaming. In the larger picture of gender socialization patterns, a girl's tomboyishness seems more easily tolerated, to the point that girls and young women make transitions into adulthood by more freely exploring their masculinity. Meanwhile, boys are rarely encouraged to experiment with anything like the "sissy" behavior which is often derogatory and incorrectly equated with the first signs of homosexuality. Thus, Micki's struggles arose from the ashes of a painful past where a stern father harshly reacted to Micki's unconventional interest in "girl things" and demanded, with verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, that he be a man and not a sissy.

The young Micki had internalized his father's repeated disappointments as a crime he'd committed by feeling and wanting to do that which was reserved for one born into a female body. The sum of painful events from her past filled with stories of conflict over society's basic gender role expectations for men, to her presently being told by some women, "you're not a 'real woman,'" forced Micki to find a support group for individuals struggling with their transgender identity feelings and choices. Society had provided the science to attempt to heal her past by changing her gender identity, but it failed to provide the supportive environment for living with that identity. Amidst the diverse forms of prejudice she would face, including the kind she experienced at her first incest survivors' meeting.

I have often wondered what would have happened in that group if Micki had not left? Did it make any difference in the few weeks she was there for someone like Micki, who has been raised as a boy and become a man to hear the depth of anger experienced by women who had survived male rape or incest and now who felt desperate at being unable to escape even a hint of male energy? Was it unreasonable for women to see Micki as more of a burden than someone who might help their healing, by vouching as a once-man for the reality of abusive male power, and affirming to them, "yes, this is what men do and you were unjustly violated"? Could either side have seen the source of their fears and their unjust experiences as rooted in societal attitudes based on male power and privilege which continue to induce heightened levels of female sexual victimization, or which so oppress some boys/men that their only escape from their gender role expectations, is to literally erase the most overt physical signs of the gender identity they were assigned at birth?

This may seem an odd topic for a feminist lesbian scholar, one seemingly focused on the plight of merely "not-men" whose dress, demeanor, and behavior takes on the appearance of rather conventional looking women. Although the resistance to my academic inquiry on this topic has been quite forceful, I am undaunted by my critics and instead have tried to refine the basis of my inquiry-- thus this essay. As a latina and lesbian scholar interested in exploring the outer reaches of gender, sexuality, and race from a feminist perspective, my theoretical interest in the plight of the transsexual under current approaches to law and the politics of identity, specially at conferences

discussing lesbian legal theory, has been greatly confused with my lobbying on behalf of transgenderism. But, I see my inquiry as an example of what Ruthann Robson calls the "hard cases" in which theorizing about those who claim the label "lesbian" forces not only a re-examination of our assumptions about what a lesbian is, but also forces us to consider how deeply the sense of who we are or who others are or should be, is affected by our living in a gendered culture. As a feminist scholar then, although some theorists may disagree with the role of the topic or the perspective, I see the subject of the transsexualism, or transgenderism, as a subject useful to the efforts of lesbian or feminist legal theorists to deconstruct the impact of male patriarchy.

The reactions to someone like Micki also illustrated for me another volatile aspect of the social revolution inspired over the past two decades by feminism, the movement for gay and lesbian civil rights, and the burgeoning politics of identity. The growing demand that theory and politics recognize the interconnections not only between sex, gender identity and sexuality, but also between race, ethnicity, class, and any of the above categories.

Ironically, it was a panel on lesbian legal theory, where I introduced the subject of transgenderism as a vehicle for exploring the outer reaches of gender-based discrimination, and was so fiercely questioned for doing so, in which I experience the ultimate illustration of the failures of progressive scholars and lawyers in not connecting theory with practice and not stressing the importance of inclusive and interconnected perspectives on issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender. I was the only latina lesbian speaker on a panel called "lesbian legal theory" and upon concluding my presentation was met with statements from members of the audience suggesting that my topic was offensive, since it was "our panel for lesbians only." I immediately felt a familiar loneliness I have often experienced over the past decade as the sole racial/ethnic minority at lesbian/gay events.

This time, however, it grew out of my belief in the need and right of a scholar who incorporates the personal narrative into her teaching and scholarship to think, write, and speak inclusively on issues of discrimination. I suddenly felt like an outsider having to justify my project before a quickly growing collective of angry white middle-class lesbians who had seemingly never traveled between the multiple worlds of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or who simply live their lives blithely assuming that everyone else's experiences as a lesbian is, or should be, exactly like their own. The rejection of my topic appeared as an indirect effort to exclude the interests of anyone who was not a "real lesbian", and to assure that the theorizing be confined to "real lesbian legal theory."

From either perspective, such resistance nurtures a damaging belief that our various progressive movements are, and should be, disconnected from each other. Such premises for the politics of identity are not only divisive, they infiltrate the legal system. If supposedly progressive activists, lawyers, and scholars cannot see the harm of disconnected theorizing and activism, we can hardly be surprised by the intransigence of the courts in recent years to broaden the interpretations of categories like "sex" or "gender" to protect against anti-lesbian/gay prejudice, or their similar resistance to recognize compound claims of discrimination to address the claims of what Kimberly Crenshaw identified as the intersectional plaintiff.

How then does theorizing about intersectionality become relevant to heated debates over the presence of a "not-man" in all women spaces or the seeming appropriation by male-to-female transsexuals (MTF's) of lesbian identity labels? I would first agree with Frank Valdes that the next step in theorizing over intersectionality must be to explore the interconnections between progressive models of litigation and scholarships. I am continually puzzled by supposed advocates against racism, sexism, or homophobia whose overwhelming emphasis on exclusivity appears as nothing more than fear-based and self-centered discriminatory conduct.

In the same way feminist scholars were charged with exclusion and insensitivity because they neglected the cause of lesbians and women of color, it seems patently inconsistent for feminist, lesbian and gay, or queer legal theorists not to explore the outer reaches of gender nonconformists.

Discriminatory activism, which induces discriminatory theorizing, cannot possibly create a world which tolerates difference and diversity whether based on sex and gender, race, creed, sexuality, national origin class, age, or physical ability. Such were the appeals of theorists like Adrienn Rich and Bell Hooks, that the struggle of feminists to deconstruct patriarchal power could not be separated from the struggle against homophobia and racism. When a women's support group against would rather fight inclusion than risk the discomfort of working against exclusion, its members give value to discrimination.

Discrimination is further valued when the labels and categories by which people might be described become more important than deconstructing the role these devices play in the effort to capture the range of aspects comprised in a single personal identity (e.g., religion, race, sexuality, age, gender, etc). Thus, I return to Micki story, whose experiences illustrate how easily we internalize the values of a white male and heterosexist culture which teaches competition, domination, control, and fear of "The Other." Our first instinct is to align with our oppressors' values and to exclude those who differ from us, rather than to include them in our cause. Unconscious of our internalized fears, we perpetuate beliefs which allow sex, gender race and class to become the strongest tools for dividing and weakening those who are already oppressed. Acting from the unconscious fear and prejudice we then rally, in theory, for a progressivism, which too often turns into an exercise of jealously guarding our own special causes (e.g., lesbians, women, blacks, chicanos) and resisting coalition with "Those Others", whose situation cannot be envisioned as a reflection of ourselves.

Some may argue that I greatly misunderstand the well meant-effort to oust an ambiguous identity like Micki's in order to preserve the empowering atmosphere of a womanspace. On a social and political level, the need by some women (using an appeal to feminism) and lesbians to reject the male-to-female transsexual (MTF) strikes me as based purely on the fear that including a not-woman/former man in womanspace effects a loss for women. The arguments made are appealing. As it is stated: A man without a penis, even one with the massive dosages of estrogen hormones required to soften the body to make it "womanish," does not rid that individual of the socialization patterns ingrained from the time of birth. Thus, the not-man, though appearing female and even possibly having been around female energy throughout his life has experienced childhood and adult life as a boy/man.

The source of the distrust and fear can of course be supported by the social reality that generally, men are different from women -- less sensitive, stronger, more aggressive and competitive, less nurturing, etc. Therefore as a former man the she/he could never identify with women's issues or their fears such as acquaintances and date or stranger rape. The she/he may experience discrimination as a transgender, of being treated as a freak, but does not know the deeply ingrained messages from birth that encourage girls and women to be subservient, nurturing more feelings-oriented, and obsessed with the need to be sexually appealing to men. Instead, as a once-man, the she/he is more comfortable with a personal identity that first knew the privilege of being presumed more intelligent, better able, worthy, individualistic, emotionally stable, just for having been born with a penis. As a once-man, the she/he has a personality which will always draw upon the experiences of someone who had and felt the power of being male. Thus, despite the hormones, the crossdressing and the SRS, a transsexual female will never be a woman, but will always be a former man, and at best an in-between woman who barely pass as female.

Other feminists argue that supporting MTF's who claim they are trapped in women's bodies is akin to supporting the offensive conformity to sex-role stereotyping. Rather than standing behind the MTF's notion of "woman", they claim, these men ought to get involved in consciousness-raising instead of surgery.

Despite the long list of reasons for distrusting the motives of the male-to-female transsexual, I wonder whether there isn't another connection between the need of some women and lesbians to exclude all MTF transsexuals as former "men" and the unconscious need to believe in biological essentialism? Does an individual's socialization as either a man or woman stop at a point of no return such that not even the most sincere candidate for undoing his "maleness," for trying to understand a woman's pain, can never be trusted in support groups or in all-womanspaces like the Michigan Women's Festival, because of the lingering effects of the testosterone in their blood and the socialization of their youth? They are formally and rationally excluded from the support groups because they've never known women's pain. The she/he is stigmatized for having had a penis and enjoying (or enduring) the privileges of being socialized as a male. By never giving the not-man an opportunity to learn or understand a woman's pain, our activism on women's behalf appears so narrow, focused only on getting angry for the victimization and avoiding any situation which may force creativity in the search for a liberated human politics.

I question whether anger should be seen as the only option for healing from the victim role that grows out of gender oppression. I question whether treating a she/he with a biological essentialist attitude doesn't perpetuate the heteropatriarchal values which constructed the gender roles of the "privileged male" and "subordinate female" in the first place. I also question whether the deep distrust in the outcome of gender identity switching rests in the pervasiveness of the dominant gender scheme which supports sexism and anti-lesbianism or homophobia by propagating a gender bipolar value system. That ideology conditions members of society to see an unbroken link from physical sex at birth to gender status, to gender role, and to a totalistic and all-encompassing sex determined social structure. All human situations are then governed by this ideology in which gender bipolarity or binary matrix of male/female tells people how to see others, how to see themselves, and how to give themselves and others gendered cues of appropriate behavior. The behavior manifests the belief that no one can or should ever depart from the roles and cues which accompany each sex/gender.

An exclusionist reaction to the MTF's illustrated the pervasiveness of the ideology of gender bipolarity. It suggests that no matter what an individual might induce as a change in gender identity for oneself, through behavior and attire, or through hormones and surgery, or even the consciousness-raising of a women's support group, their transition cannot be trusted or accepted. Instead, the cultural need to perpetuate the biological essentialism wrapped up in the dominant gender ideology surfaces everywhere. Its alternative -- that gender is socially constructed everyday, recedes to the background. The breadth of an ideology based on gender bipolarity well explains then, how the courts continue to either conflate gender, biological sex, and sexuality or bizarrely enough, disaggregate them.

Individuals who fail to conform to the heterosexist normative principles of gender bipolarity, thus suffer "sex based discrimination" for their gendered nonconformist to the social limits, for their biological sex in the workplace, family life, and love relationships.

The basis of the cultural need to perceive and/or discriminate against someone for their failure to conform to the governing gender rules, comprises at least eight different elements:

- 1) there are two, and only two genders (female and male);

- 2) that one's gender is invariant (if you are female/male, you always were female/male and you will always be female/male;
- 3) genitals are the essential sign of gender (a female is a person with a vagina; a male is a person with a penis);
- 4) any exceptions to two genders are not to be taken seriously;
- 5) there are no transfers from one gender to another without masquerade;
- 6) everyone must be classified as a member of one gender or another (there are no cases where gender is not attributed);
- 7) the male/female dichotomy is a natural one (males and females exist independently of scientists or anyone else's criteria for being male or female); and
- 8) membership in one gender or another is natural (one's being female is not dependent on anyone's deciding who you are).

The impact of such an all-encompassing framework of beliefs about gender is vast. People who depart from their assigned gender identities, roles, cues, and values, experience discrimination because they undermine the notions of biology which thoroughly infuse the dominant gender scheme. In that scheme, normalcy becomes a rigid set of gender identities and roles for the female/male sexed body. Discounting the reality of people born with ambiguously sexed bodies, the bipolar gendered ideology upholds the image of the masculine "real man" and the feminine "real woman".

Departures from the gendered norms becomes the stuff of social and legal discriminations. Women who have females lovers not being able to keep their children, two men or two women not being able to marry in most states, a surgical female not being able to marry a man, openly gays or lesbians not being able to serve in the military, effeminate man being freely sexually harassed by macho men, and so on. In a legal context, the discrimination arising from these failures to conform to society's basic rules of sex and gender constitutes nothing but gender-based discrimination. The individuals who depart from those norms, either willfully or not, are "transgendered" or "gender rebels" when their dress, attitudes, behavior or identity steps out of the governing masculine/male/feminine/female identity framework and into a context in which gender ambiguity sets the norm. Yet, as long as we value gender bipolarity over gender fluidity, society will freely allow gender rebels in sexual behavior or identity (e.g., lesbians, transsexuals) to be harmed by unfair prejudice. The prejudice against Micki, for example, was premised on the belief that she/he could presumably never be a woman because she/he, though quiet, demure and feminine, betrayed her experience as a man by displaying a self-confident demeanor not typical of women.

My goal here has been only to glimpse at the roots of activism and theorizing which appears unduly committed to bipolar and essentialist thinking in matters of sex and gender just like the bipolarism of white/black in race relations, which infuses this nation. Bipolarism can never reflect the diversity of the world we live in.

In the area of race categories, for example, bipolarism encourages us to ignore our being surrounded by individuals who do not neatly fit into the paradigm of black/white just as the world is not just male/female or heterosexual-homosexual. Racially, there are African-Americans who pass for white, Hispanics with Anglo or European names and faces, Black Asians, and White Native-Americans, as well as European-Americans whose ancestry has been subsumed under the catchall label "white". There are intersectional queers who experience discrimination as black gay men, latina lesbians, and black or hispanic transgendered queers. Although the boundaries of categories like race, gender and sex are quite blurred when we look beyond the experience of the mostly white and/or heterosexual people who have dominated the legal discourse, our activism

and our social theorizing clearly does not allow for race or gender ambiguity, and neither does the experience in the courts. Not surprisingly, plaintiffs in discrimination suits are discouraged from introducing dual or compound factors to explain their discriminatory treatment, even where the facts would sustain an interrelated function of the categories (i.e., race and sexual orientation).

My interest then in the topic of transgenderism in the late 20th century, is not just as an aspect of the burgeoning politics of sexual identity, but as an important part of the quest by feminists and/or critical race theorists to deconstruct and interconnect the roles of gender, race, and class oppression in American culture. We need to see all aspects of the sex/gender/sexual orientation or the race/color ethnicity question from the perspective that our beliefs can dangerously be affected by essentialist attitudes, whether they are about the sexed or racialized body. If you are lesbian, gay, a woman, or heterosexual the transgendered experience may not be your experience, but the thinking that undergirds their discrimination must be made our experience.

In reflecting on the diversity of our lesbian and gay and bisexual community, we should be reminded of the historical presence of the transgendered individual -- as once having been the crossdressers of the 19TH century, the drag queens of the fifties, and having become the partially or fully queer/transgender FTM's or MTF's of today.

White and middle class lesbians who are afraid of male-to-female transsexuals unfortunately assume that all MTF's are pseudo white men or former white gay men, or some such variation on the antithesis of their own identity. That false consciousness ignores the intersections of race and class, which also impact on the lives of transgendered individuals, some of whom in other times would have been the lesbian gay/bi/transvestites of their era, long before the civil rights political history.

Thus, to resist the transgendered is not just to movements of blacks, women, and queers who changed America's social and political history. Thus, to resist the transgendered is not just to reject the remnants of male privilege in a white male-to-female transsexual; it may be to reject all the others who have been "queer" in the past, all those who defied the closeted, straight-looking gender conformists and all those whose lives exist out of the mainstream white/gay/lesbian activism of today -- poor/working class, black, latino, very butch/femme, partial transgendered drags, etc. Transgenderism, then, is as much a subject for feminist inquiry as it is for lesbian or queer theory.

How people react to the subject, and the persons seemingly affected by the analysis (MTF's to FTM's), provides us with a reminder that progressive theorizing can dangerously internalize the values of its oppressors. We must resist hegemonic approaches which falsely suggest that everything we do with the gender or the "lesbian" or the queer question ever applies to one category or easily defined people. For who you are and who I am may occasionally share a common label, and yet how each of us defines and experiences that label (i.e., lesbian) is completely dependent on the time, place, manner, history, social and cultural context which affect our personal criteria (e.g., race, class, etc.).

It seems like such an old complaint, the reminder that feminism or lesbian, or critical race, or queer legal theories are not just about one polar opposite experience of oppression by white middle-class women, or lesbians, or black men, or hispanics, and so on. Whether our approach to dismantling the rule of law/men/whites/heterosexuals in our lives uses gender, or lesbianism, or race/color/ethnicity as categories or analysis, the quest must acknowledge the message in the hard cases and be in touch with the blurred gender and race identities of the world we live in.

An added value might be some compassionate recognition that who you see and what you believe they are, or are not, merely reflects the belief systems you have relied upon for that given

day. Exploring the outer boundaries of gender, sexuality, and race without fear, offers us a way of looking at the complexity of the identities we perceive without the divisive impact of our preconceived prejudices and our arrogance.

The hostile reactions to society's gender rebels, whether they are America's middle and working-class gays, butch lesbians, white or black/hispanic transsexuals, rich and poor crossdressers, full and part-time transgendered drags, and so on, suggests that we don't even have a vocabulary for understanding the possibilities of living in a society in which gender or racial fluidity are the norm. Yet, there are cultures, even in America, where gender and racial ambiguity is the norm of social existence, so I do not speak of something that is unreachable as a matter of theory or practice. But, we will not get to a place where our theorizing and activism are informed by awareness of the world's diversity until we let go of the need to give biological essentialism its illegitimate role in defining the boundaries of sex, gender, race and sexuality.

Thank you.