

Fear in the Bathroom

Let's Talk Gender

M. Gabriela Torres



Caution Bathroom Under Construction. Photo courtesy M. Gabriela Torres

I once taught a course titled, “Fear in the Making of the Americas” that focused on how fear has worked throughout history to shape identity. Fear of women possessed by the devil or disgraced because of perceived transgressions, fear of migrants, and fears of disease all fueled nation-building throughout the Americas.

Today, fear continues to shape our identity as individuals and as nations. Gender, likewise, still lies at the center of many of our fears.

For instance, take the routine conflation of gender, sex and sexual orientation that morphs into our banal but powerful fear of difference. Our misunderstanding of gender, combined with our reliance on fear as a way to make ourselves, has unambiguous consequences.

Simply put, misunderstanding what gender is and fearing it guarantees the erasure of persons.

Such is the case in the resistance to acknowledging transgendered persons' rights to access the public toilets that they themselves deem appropriate. A campaign waged against Houston's Equal Rights Ordinance was won on the slogan, “No Men in Women's Bathrooms.” The successful [campaign incited fear](#) by insinuating that the ordinance enabled any man, including sexual predators, to prey on women in public bathrooms.

Equating gender, sex and sexual orientation — a regular practice in [the rhetoric of those who oppose municipal anti-discrimination ordinances](#) — seems ludicrous from a cross-cultural perspective. [Conceptions of gender differ widely](#) across cultures and do so independent of sex or sexual orientation. From the work of Margaret Mead we have understood that gender is both constructed and lived in culture.

Because gender is always culture-bound, around the world it is seldom restricted to a man/woman binary nor is it easily mapped into biological notions of sex. Across cultures, humans have imagined and lived gender as an identity that may change and as an identity that is sometimes neither man nor woman.

For example, take the formation of gender in post-soviet Cuba. In her recent volume [After Love](#), Noelle Stout shows that *identity categories* are always shifting and are increasingly globalized. Driven by a rapidly changing economy, *identity categories* such as gay and transgender are understood, rejected and re-purposed by Cubans in complicated ways that sometimes echo their meaning in the US and Europe but more often than not take on unique forms.

Cuban categories such as pingueros (ostensibly men who have sex with foreigners for money) or travesties (men who began their sexual development adopting a gay identification and increasingly taking on feminine modes of being) are fluid, often context-dependent, and unaccounted for in our typical male/female, straight/gay binaries. However, in Cuba, these categories are also changing as they are increasingly being defined in reference to global ideas of what constitutes transgender and gay.

Without a doubt, gender and sexuality- in Cuba and in our own context- is indeed complicated and fluid. Given the persistent gender diversity in our world, why do we fear difference? Further, what underlies our cultural preference for a strict gender binary that leads us to fear any diversity that might be present in the adjacent bathroom stall?

The simple answer may be that we prefer a gender binary because imagining complexity in gender makes us question the social norms that underlie our very sense of self. Questioning who we are and how we have come to be is scary because it typically destabilizes essentialisms that make life seem straightforward and easy to understand.

Querying gender is particularly scary because we can't help but be gendered. Yet anthropology has shown that the shifting nature of gender enables a great many possibilities for being human. The creativity that we embody need not cause fear.

While we do sometimes make through fear, we have perhaps longer histories of making ourselves through inquiry. Questioning who we are and our place in the world is, after all, a quintessential characteristic of being human, and anthropologically, a more significant force of social change.

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