

CHAPTER 8

Intersectionalities

Race, social class, gender, and sex are aspects of identity that intersect with queerness. This chapter highlights common struggles across different aspects of identities.

Audre Lorde is known for describing herself as “Black, lesbian, feminist, mother, warrior, poet.” For Lorde, these markers interacted with and affected her life simultaneously.

Today, feminists, other activists, and those involved in the professions of law and social work use the term **intersectionality** to describe our complex awareness that we inhabit—and are inhabited by—multiple categories of identity and that our experience of several identities taken together may be emotionally, culturally, and materially different than the experience of any one particular identity category by itself. A white gay man, for instance, might feel oppressed by society’s negative attitudes toward LGBT people at the same time that he enjoys privilege connected to being a white man. Conversely, a black gay man may experience his queerness not only as a gay man but as a black man; that is, he negotiates two minoritized categories in U.S. culture. His experience, however, is not necessarily one of just “doubled” oppression; rather, he may experience both a dominant culture and an African-American culture that code gayness as a white phenomenon, so his queerness may be invisible to many in his different communities. His experience of himself as a black gay man assumes complexities and nuances that are intrinsic to how this culture understands and constructs both race and sexuality. At the same time,

Find Out More about Marlon Riggs's view of his documentary, *Tongues Untied*, in Chapter 12 of this text.

intersectionality also allows us to see not only how multiple identities complicate our lives but also how the very aspects of our identity that are sources of oppression in one environment serve as sources of privilege in another. A butch lesbian, for example, may experience sexist and heterosexist oppression associated with her femaleness and her homosexuality; that same sexism may also transform her perceived masculinity into a kind of power (Gibson, Marinara, and Meem). And intersectionality is inescapable; we are all, as Lorde points out, influenced by a number of different (and sometimes even oppositional) aspects of our identities—whether we are conscious of it or not.

Let us consider a more specific example of how this may work. A New York court case known as *In the Matter of the Adoption of Evan* ruled that a nonbiological lesbian parent (Diane F.) could adopt the artificially inseminated child of her partner (Valerie C.). In reaching this ruling, the court found the adoption to be in the best interest of the child Evan and also cited other lesbian adoption decisions. The highest rationale seemed to be the validation of the nuclear family: “While noting financial and emotional reasons favoring the adoption, the court clearly viewed the legitimization of Evan’s family as primary” (Rosenblum 98). The court officer made it clear that the class position of Evan’s mothers was a strong supporting factor in his ruling: “Diane, age 39, is an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and an attending physician at a respected teaching hospital. Valerie, age 40, holds a Ph.D. in psychology and teaches at a highly regarded private school” (Rosenblum 104). We may note the subjective inclusion of value judgments here: the hospital is “respected” and the school is “highly regarded.” In contrast, let us consider the Mississippi case *White v. Thompson*. In this case, lesbian mother White lost custody of her children to her ex-husband’s parents. Part of the stated reason for this ruling was that the court found White and her partner to be “unfit, morally and otherwise” to raise children because they were lesbians (Rosenblum 105). But a strong corroborating factor was social class. White worked in a convenience store, occasionally leaving the children unsupervised while they slept because she could not afford a babysitter. In addition, wrote the court, “[s]he and her lover . . . lived together in a trailer with their children” (qtd. in Rosenblum 105). Did Valerie and Diane win their adoption petition partly because of their class privilege? Did White and her partner lose custody partly because they were poor? Certainly, these cases raise questions about the way social class affects individuals’ ability to show what in our culture is considered to be a “stable family environment” and to marshal the resources necessary to wage a protracted legal battle. The intersection of lesbianism and social class—and geographical location—had strong bearing on the legal outcomes of both of these cases.

Feminist scholars Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey define **intersectionality** as “an integrative perspective that emphasizes the intersection of several attributes, for example, gender, race, class, and nation” (G-3). This definition seems straightforward, but as the two cases described above indicate, the impact on the personal lives of individuals can be quite complicated and varied because the complex of attributes differs from person to person. Within the intersectional paradigm, a lesbian is never just a lesbian, a gay man is never just a gay man, and so forth. The focus on intersectionality as a tool for conceptualizing the nature of interlocking oppressions arose in the late 1980s, when legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw used the idea specifically “to articulate the intersection of racism and patriarchy” and “to describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and anti-racism” (“Mapping” 1265). Crenshaw pointed out that these “problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (“Demarginalizing” 140). Here she seems to be rejecting then-popular *inclusion theories*, such as multiculturalism. She implies that thinking in terms of intersectionality means doing important critical work that thinking in terms of inclusion does not. In an inclusive environment, individuals are encouraged to represent categories (a black man speaks for black men, or a lesbian speaks for lesbians, for example); inclusivity, in other words, involves the habitual use of essentializing, even stereotypical, attributes.

Intersectional analyses, on the other hand, attempt to de-essentialize identity by assuming multiple and shifting identifications; they also pick up on queer theory’s postmodern notion of strategic identity performance. We recall that the women of the Combahee River Collective articulated their experience of multiple oppressions and general invisibility as black lesbians in the 1970s [λ Chapter 4]. In that spirit, using examples from law, literature, domestic violence discourse, and sensational public debate (the Anita Hill testimony at Clarence Thomas’s confirmation hearing, for example), Crenshaw challenges antiracism and antisexism groups to rethink “the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating ‘women’s experience’ or ‘the Black experience’ into concrete policy demands” (“Demarginalizing” 140).

The introduction of intersectionality as a schema for approaching the study of queer oppression has developed as LGBT people have become increasingly aware of the ways in which attributes other than sexuality create intellectual, emotional, and material diversity. In the previous chapter, *Queer Diversities*, we discussed

Find Out More about
queer theory and identity
in Chapter 11.

specific instances of how LGBT people are tolerated or discriminated against for their specific queerness [[λ](#) Chapter 7]. Intersectionality allows us to see an even more complex picture of how individuals are included or excluded by considering their queerness in its relationship to other identity categories, such as race, class, age, and nationality. In fact, we have come to see that the very notion of LGBT community is problematic because every member of the groups represented by those letters has had experiences that might not be shared or experienced similarly by the others based on their complex and multiple identities.

Keeping in mind these rich sociocultural contexts is crucial if we are to understand what sexual behavior means to individuals and to groups and if we are to avoid the trap of presentism [[λ](#) Introduction]. When collecting data about sexual behaviors in the 1940s and 1950s, Alfred Kinsey interviewed whites and blacks, rich and poor, but his analysis never focused on how sexuality is experienced differently across race and social class [[λ](#) Chapter 5]. Why are such omissions problematic? We know, for instance, that historically and contemporaneously, some people engage in homoerotic behavior without adopting gay or lesbian identities. It is also the case that, in some African-American and Latino cultures, a man can penetrate another man in a sexual encounter and not consider himself—or be considered by others—gay. In those cultures, men are figured as *penetrators* and women or gay men as the *penetrated*. Such examples clearly demonstrate that how one understands his or her sexuality is deeply rooted in other social and cultural contexts. Understanding the intersection of those contexts provides us a richer sense of how sexuality, race, class, gender, nationality, and other identity markers function simultaneously. We need to develop this sense if we are to understand better how sex and sexuality function in people’s lives.

The “Down Low” and Applied Intersectional Theory

Near the beginning of his article “Some Queer Notions about Race,” Samuel R. Delany admits that he has “always felt a difficulty in discussing the problems [of race and sexuality] together.” Specifically, he feels that “[t]o speak of gay oppression in the context of racial oppression always seemed an embarrassment. Somehow it was to speak of the personal and the mechanics of desire in the face of material deprivation and vast political and imperialist and nationalist systemics” (201). While we respect Delany’s point of view and observe that he complicates the argument as the article goes on, we believe that our discussion of the importance of intersectional analyses demonstrates that issues such as race and sexuality cannot easily be separated. Claiming that one issue (such as race) is about “material deprivation” whereas another (sexuality) is about the “mechanics of desire” fails to

account for the many ways in which sexuality issues are entangled in economic issues as well as the many ways in which racial issues are entangled in cultural notions about sex. Moreover, Delany's statement ignores the core feminist insight that "the personal is political" and that separating them elides the experiences of women and other "muted groups" (Ardener).

We can see the intersection of the personal and the political, and of race and sexuality, in representations of the phenomenon of the *down low*, a slang term describing what many (J. L. King, for instance) identify as a sexual phenomenon among some black men. The popular media tell us that these men form secretive groups whose purpose is providing opportunities to have clandestine sexual encounters with one another. The idea has been so intriguing to the American public that it became a topic on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Between February and December 2001, the down low was the subject of feature stories in newspapers all over the country and in magazines such as *VIBE*, *Essence*, and *Jet*. Most of these stories portrayed black women as the unknowing victims of black men engaging in sexual behavior with one another and connected the down low with the spread of HIV/AIDS to these straight black women. Gay author and activist Keith Boykin, who doubts the truth of much down low mythology, writes, "The down low fit perfectly into larger cultural dynamics because it confirmed stereotypical values that many of us already believed. For some whites, it confirmed their hypersexualized perception of black people, and for some blacks it confirmed their hypersexualized perception of gay men. Given society's stereotypical view of black men combined with societal beliefs about homosexuality, the story became more believable because it vilified a group of people we did not understand and many of us did not want to know" (151).

Boykin's discussion is intersectional in that it deploys an analysis of race, sexuality, social class, and gender dynamics to help us understand why a phenomenon such as the down low so fully captured the American imagination. The enormous interest in the idea of black men meeting regularly to engage in sexual acts—and the idea that such behavior was somehow predatory and that it threatened the precarious hold many believed the United States had on the spread of HIV/AIDS—confirmed myths about black men that have been part of the public



Figure 8.1 Keith Boykin.

consciousness in this country since slavery. It also helped confirm what many people believed about gay men—namely, that sexually insatiable homosexual men spread disease through their behavior, which constitutes a sin punishable by painful death. What’s more, stories about families affected by men on the down low confirmed what many have come to believe about heterosexual relationships by portraying women as the unwitting victims of men’s sexual promiscuity. A single-issue analysis of media hype around the down low might have encouraged LGBT people to “adopt” the men portrayed in the coverage as gay men oppressed by a society that provides few outlets for the more open expression of their sexuality and pushes them into heterosexual relationships. And the statistics delivered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which seemed to indicate that more black women were getting AIDS than at any other point in the history of the disease, appeared to confirm the existence of a covert down low. However, Boykin points out that the CDC reported 4,000 fewer new cases of AIDS among blacks in 2001 than in 1991, while the percentage of AIDS cases among black women rose because the number of AIDS cases among white women decreased sharply during that same period (167). A misreading of the statistics, particularly the percentages, seemed to indicate a widespread down low phenomenon, while a closer look at the numbers challenged this assumption.

J. L. King, who is a primary focus of Boykin’s criticism, as well as other men interviewed for stories on the down low, disagree with Boykin’s claim that “America’s recent obsession with the down low is not about the truth” (5), but it seems obvious that, whether or not the cultural phenomenon exists, Boykin’s point about the reasons for its prominence in the collective American psyche makes some sense. After all, as the discussion of Kinsey in Chapter 5 illustrates, thinking about the private sexual lives of our neighbors titillates many Americans. What’s more, on a very real level, confirmation of our stereotypes is comforting. When we examine the issue intersectionally—that is, when we consider how not only queerness but also race are understood and constructed in American society—we can easily see how panic about the down low arises. Many in the United States fear not only queer sexualities but also people of color; the combination of queerness and blackness, coupled with basic assumptions of male aggressiveness, led to a scenario in which it was easy to imagine covert black gay male predators infecting women at an alarming rate. The reality, of course, is not nearly so simple.

Women, Class, and Internationality

Other important sexuality issues, particularly those involving the locations of women and lesbians, are best understood through intersectional analyses. In “Spirit and Passion,” Carmen Vazquez argues that many gay

rights strategies do not sufficiently or critically take into account “those of us who happen to be female, of color, working-class, or poor” (697). For Vazquez, political strategies that argue that gays and lesbians should be “mainstreamed” and given exactly the same rights as heterosexuals fail to recognize the economic injustices that many women throughout the world already face. Put another way, she asks us to reconsider the “mainstream” and whether or not it is worth joining. Gays, for instance, may seek the right to marry, but if the right to marry occurs in a context in which women are at a persistent economic disadvantage to men, then how do lesbians materially benefit from the right to marry? Marriage, too, is a double-edged sword, because in many countries, it is the primary vehicle of women’s social and economic disempowerment.



Figure 8.2 Carmen Vazquez.

The importance of considering such issues intersectionally becomes clear when examining marriage in an international context. In Bulgaria, for example, marriage is an economic imperative for women. A young woman typically goes directly from her parents’ house to her husband’s, never living on her own. This life trajectory militates against the development of lesbian relationships and cultures. Monika Pisankaneva writes that Bulgarian women “encounter more difficulties than men in starting a career; they are driven to low-rank professions like teachers, secretaries, nurses or shop-assistants; these ‘female’ professions are so poorly paid that no one could live independently earning so little” (139). Pisankaneva acknowledges that “young lesbians are more motivated than heterosexual women to leave their homes” but may be hampered in finding work if they appear too masculine. Thus, “[i]n long-term lesbian relationships it is usually the more feminine partner who becomes the breadwinner” while “[m]asculine-looking women usually find low-paid jobs such as shop assistants, construction or service workers” (139). This pattern resembles some typical **butch-femme** relationships in the United States in the 1950s, where the femme (because she enacted gender-normative female behavior) often functioned as the primary family wage earner (Kennedy and Davis). In both cases, the “employable” woman was invisible as a lesbian and merely put up with the economic deprivations associated with femaleness in her culture.

Both Pisankaneva and Kennedy and Davis link butch-femme gender presentation to nonelite class positioning. Alison Murray's analysis of Indonesian lesbian life points out that "[t]here is no lesbian 'community' in Jakarta, since class overdetermines both gender and sexuality" (166). At the same time, "lower class lesbians" are associated with "butch-femme roles, promiscuity, and insalubrious nightlife" (175). Murray interprets the correlation of lower social class with more rigid gender roles as an indicator of outness: "For the lower class without privileges to lose, overt signifiers of 'deviance' within a subcultural street milieu suggest a source of resistance to power" (166). Here again, we see that it is impossible to understand what it means to be lesbian in Indonesia without an intersectional analysis that includes gender and class in addition to sexuality.

We must not assume, however, that only women are restricted by cultural norms and economic placement from easy access to a queer life. Shivananda Khan describes the relationship between "high levels of sexual repression" and "urgent sexual release" for men in India. Sexual expression, writes Khan, must take place in a context of absolute lack of privacy. A man in New Delhi commented, "Privacy? What privacy? I share a room with my three older brothers, and I have had sex with all of them. The other room is where my parents and grandparents sleep. There is no lock on the door. In the hallway, my uncle and aunt sleep. It's like this everywhere in India" (110). Similarly, Tomás Almaguer writes that "[t]he constraints of family life often prevent homosexual Mexican men from securing unrestricted freedom to stay out late at night, to move out of their family's home before marriage, or to take an apartment with a male lover. Thus their opportunities to make homosexual contacts in other than anonymous locations, such as the balconies of movie theaters or certain parks, are severely constrained" (260). These examples highlight customs that work against male independence in ways that parallel the traditional cloistering of women within family space. In some cultures, familial identifications override other identity categories. In China, as Wah-Shan Chou argues, the traditional culture "simply refuses to classify people into homo or hetero because individuals (both women and men, homo or heterosexually inclined ones) are first and foremost members of the family and wider society" (34). Both parents and children internalize this way of being in the world. Thus, if a child comes out as a *tongzhi* (homosexual), parents feel "the shame of losing face for having a deviant child who does not get married." The young person, too, feels pain because "[i]n a society where filial piety is given the utmost importance in defining a person, hurting one's parents can be the most terrible thing for a *tongzhi* to experience" (34). Here, the intersection of non-endorsed sexuality and a powerful family-centric social organization works against individual agency. This pattern may occur even in a space of relative freedom such as the United States, where individualism is a central value. Ann Allen Shockley, for instance, writes of the fictional Roz, a black woman who brings her white lover Marge "Home to Meet the Folks." Roz's mother is surprised

and disappointed, but her Black Nationalist brother and his wife are overtly hostile; they castigate Roz not only for being a lesbian but for being a race traitor.

We have already seen how conservative social and sexual values have been used to bolster a nationalist agenda [λ Chapter 3]. In Russia, after the 1917 revolution, the Bolshevik state considered homosexuality a “degenerative disease of the terminally bourgeois” and urged prominent gay men to marry women or leave the country. According to Laurie Essig, “Under the Soviets, . . . [h]omosexuality was a crime not just against ‘nature’ but against society. Homosexual acts were treasonous in the (dis)utopia of the Workers’ State” (5). Similarly, in Cuba during the 1960s (and to some extent still today), homosexuals were defined as second-class citizens. They were excluded from membership in the Communist Party, which in itself guaranteed an inability to rise in the social order. Fidel Castro reportedly refused to believe that any homosexual could be “a true Revolutionary, a true Communist militant” (Lockwood 124). Ian Lumsden feels that the real sin was never homosexuality per se but rather male resistance to the powerful cult of *machismo*, or hypermasculinity. The Cuban state seems to have worried less about bourgeois corruption than about effeminacy. In Cuba, Lumsden writes, “[s]exual orientation is inferred from gender identity rather than vice versa, as tends to be the case in North America” (132). Therefore, a man who exhibits even the slightest “effeminate” behavior (crossing one leg at the knee or gesturing expressively while talking) is assumed to be homosexual. Here again, we see how an intersectional analysis reveals linkages among sexuality, gender, cultural and social organization, and citizenship.

Find Out More about the link between nationalism and homophobia in Sonnet Gabbard’s article in the readings at the end of this chapter.

Tools for Intersectional Analysis

The concept of intersectionality is often difficult to grasp until we think simultaneously—and critically—about our own multiple identities. When we consider our personal traits and characteristics in relation to one another, in relation to varying cultural contexts in which those identities occur, and in relation to changes in those identities over time, we can understand how the concept of intersectionality applies to our own lives. Scholars have invented several different diagrams and exercises designed to enhance our understanding of intersectionality. These diagrams offer us a picture of how identities, sociocultural contexts, and political realities intersect.

A popular self-classification tool from the feminist consciousness-raising movement of the 1970s (with some modifications by us) asks its users to position themselves

within a hierarchical model according to their multiple identifications and their experience of privilege or oppression associated with each (see Figure 8.3).

Most Relative Privilege	Male	Middle Class	Heterosexual	White	Young	Able-bodied	Thin	Christian	Butch
Less Relative Privilege	Female	Working Class	Lesbian, Gay	Of Color	Middle-Aged	Differently Abled	Larger	Religion other than Christian	Femme
Least Relative Privilege	Gender not easily pegged as female or male	Poor	Bisexual, Transgender		Old	Disabled	Fat		

Figure 8.3 Relative Privilege and Oppression.

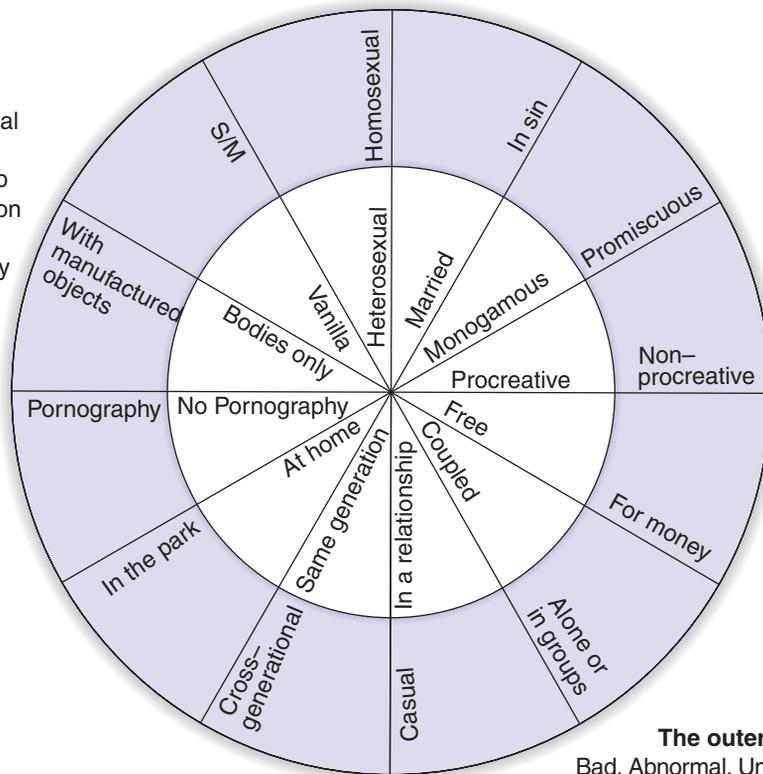
Users of this tool mark characteristics of their own identities then think about them in terms of the privilege or oppression they experience in relation to those identifications. As you may notice, when you try this exercise for yourself, the outcome is more complicated than you might expect. For instance, someone who performs the intersectional identification female, lesbian, of color, and butch might find that the butch identification, when combined with other factors, does not necessarily translate into a greater degree of privilege than the femme, as the table indicates it should.

In “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle Rubin observes that “the realm of sexuality . . . has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression” (4). Rubin describes a “sex hierarchy” composed of an inner “charmed circle” and the “outer limits.” She characterizes the charmed circle as comprising “normal, natural, healthy, holy” sex and the outer circle as “abnormal, unnatural, sick, sinful” sex (14). (See Figure 8.4.)

Rubin observes that “[t]his kind of sexual morality . . . grants virtue to the dominant groups, and relegates vice to the underprivileged.” This particular way of doing intersectionality simultaneously analyzes political, legal and moral usage; we may recall the value judgments that lay behind the New York and Mississippi adoption and custody decisions discussed earlier in this chapter. Rubin makes the point that this way of figuring sexuality resembles what she calls “ideologies of racism” (15), and if you examine Rubin’s charmed circle carefully, you will see how it also recognizes ideologies of classism in our society. Monogamous married heterosexual sex at

The charmed circle:

- Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality
- Heterosexual
- Married
- Monogamous
- Procreative
- Non-commercial
- In pairs
- In a relationship
- Same generation
- In private
- No pornography
- Bodies only
- Vanilla



The outer limits:

- Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality
- Homosexual
- Unmarried
- Promiscuous
- Non-procreative
- Commercial
- Alone or in groups
- Casual
- Cross-generational
- In public
- Pornography
- With manufactured objects
- Sadomasochistic

Figure 8.4 Gayle Rubin's charmed circle.

home is far closer to the center of the circle as opposed to sex for money or in public. What assumptions are made here? Certainly, the economic stability of married home life is privileged over alternative forms of sexual expression, and the close connection of sexuality with economic stability (you should have sex in the privacy of your own home) stigmatizes those who cannot afford such a luxury as privacy or who need to supplement low incomes through sex work. Rubin assumes that sexuality and class

Find Out More in Kathy Y. Wilson’s “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” in the readings at the end of this chapter.

intersect to promote certain kinds of lives and intimacies and to disparage others.

Intersectional analyses provide a valuable sense of how multiple constructs of identity, community, and ideology combine to reinforce social norms and squelch dissent. Patricia Hill Collins, writing in *Black Sexual Politics*, argues that “[r]acism and heterosexism . . . share a common set of practices that are designed to discipline the population into accepting the status quo” (96). For example, both racism and heterosexism draw boundaries around whom it is appropriate to love and be intimate with, and they reinforce the norm (at least in the West) as predominantly white and heterosexual. Indeed, crossing racial lines in love is still culturally discouraged in many parts of the world—whether those relationships are hetero- or homoerotic. And so too is crossing generational boundaries. Age intersects sexuality in powerful ways, as we demonstrated with the example of ancient Greek pederasty and the contrasting example of the contemporary North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). But in many other ways, we draw boundaries around age and sexuality; we are often disturbed by older men pursuing younger adult women, while an older woman and younger man coupling doesn’t seem as challenging or odd. Why is this so? At the same time, in many queer communities, pairings of older and younger people are not uncommon, particularly as an older individual can assist a younger individual financially and in getting a start in adulthood. Examining such dynamics offers us a richer sense of how people organize—and are allowed to imagine—their lives.

Thinking about race, gender, class, age, and sexuality simultaneously shows us how ideologies based on them serve particular political interests and agendas. Understanding these matrices provides us a way to analyze—and critique—interlocking oppressions. In the following chapters, we will continue to represent queerness as it intersects a variety of other significant markers of identity, community, and ideology. Doing so not only will allow us to represent queerness with the complexity it deserves but will also show us how many different members of LGBT communities throughout the world construct their identities, form communities, and critique the sociocultural pressures that frequently oppress them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Intersectional analyses offer us ways to understand queerness in particular and sexuality in general as they are embedded in other sociocultural and political contexts. Look back at some of the ways in which we, the authors of this textbook, have represented queerness in earlier chapters. Where might some of our representations, in specific cases, have become all the richer with additional intersectional analysis? Try your hand at rewriting some of our examples with that added emphasis.

2. Some critics have argued that intersectional analyses are so complex that they work against the possibility of cogent political action. That is, if identities are so complex, then how can we argue for and achieve broad political change based on them? How might you address such a criticism? What are the ways in which intersectional analyses might actually support political change?
3. Richard Ford's article "What's Queer about Race?" in the readings at the end of this chapter describes the liberating feel of a queer theoretical approach to notions of race. Think about Ford's point. Do you agree? If gayness and gender (as well as marriage) can be subject to "corrosive critique" via the concept of queer, can race also be fruitfully analyzed in this way?

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READINGS

➤ Kathy Y. Wilson

(July 2008), United States

“Just a Closer Walk with Thee”

Call her a radical. Call her an upstart. Call her a lesbian BaptiMethoCostal. Just don't call Pastor Lesley E. Jones's Truth & Destiny Covenant Ministries a gay church.

The chrome-studded motorcycle should be a dead giveaway. So should the lovers' casual touch during service. But at first blush, little about Truth & Destiny Covenant Ministries in Northside is easily reconcilable or recognizable if yours is a—let's get this out of the way right now—homophobic, fire-and-brimstone church experience.

Not the motorcycle out front on warm Sundays driven there by a black lesbian; not the same-gender couples who share Bibles and blithely brush against one another like intimates; not the teenagers who run the aisles with abandon, dancing and shouting in Pentecostal fits of Holy Spirit calisthenics. And certainly not the Rev. Lesley E. Jones, the lesbian pastor who cofounded Truth & Destiny Covenant Ministries (TDCM) in 2003. Adorned in a cassock and square-toed patent leather loafers, Jones sings, sweats, prays, shouts, and leads her congregation of 100-plus members through to salvation.

Worship at TDCM is different from worship at mainline white churches; different from worship at many black churches, too. Rest assured, at Truth & Destiny, no one will ever use the lame analogy about God creating “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” If you're gay or lesbian, you will not be preached about in the third person; you won't be told to change your ways or risk eternal damnation. All gender identities, races, sexual orientations, and even faiths are embraced at TDCM. Jones's business card states the mission clearly: “Preaching the Radically Inclusive Gospel.” The banner hanging outside above the door trumpets a similar message: “Boldly Proclaiming God's Love For All People.”

TDCM exists despite, and maybe even because of, the homophobia and misogyny ensconced in some segments of the black church, whether Baptist, Pentecostal, Episcopal, or Methodist, and it's on its way to being a groundbreaking model of “radically inclusive” worship for congregations struggling to adopt more progressive practices. This small church is gearing up for nothing short of a revolution. And Reverend Jones, a 41-year-old lesbian mother who dedicated her life to Christ during childbirth—*she shall lead them*.

“You wanna know how to stay on the battlefield?” Reverend Jones asks rhetorically, surveying her congregation. “Listen to a good soldier. Don't just study the Bible, study the people of God.”

Her robe is cinched at the waist by a wide purple sash. She's skulking across the pulpit, wiping her brow and gripping the microphone. Directly behind her, seven small glass block windows form a cross in the wall. To the left, there's a full drum kit. A center aisle leads directly to the pulpit. The church is casual, with worshipers wearing jeans, shorts, and sneakers and walking around during songs, sermons, and passages of personal testimony.

They call out “Pastor Lesley” while she’s preaching or making announcements. In turn, she is relaxed, confident, straightforward. Of average height and build, she is a brown-skinned woman with thick, shoulder-length black hair that she wears tied back until, in a moment of particular fire and fervor, she unleashes it for effect.

It’s the first Sunday in April and the small, spare church is nearly full. There are teenagers, elderly women from the neighborhood, lesbian couples, and several single men all sitting on straight-back chairs. The congregants are rapt and responsive. Some fidget with Holy Spirit tics—rocking, pushing to the edges of their seats, hands flapping mid-air. They are filled with religious energy waiting to be uncorked by the right scripture, the perfect intonation, the well-placed hymn.

“I can tell who’s saved and who’s carnal-minded,” she says.

“C’moon, pastor,” someone pleads.

“And just because you’re carnal-minded doesn’t mean you’re not saved. It means you’re nominal . . .”

“*Huh!*” someone hiccups in a James Brown punctuation.

“. . . you’re doing just enough,” Jones finishes.

Then Jones mixes the sin of Saturday night with the redemption of Sunday morning. “Some of y’all need to git *loooow!*” she exhorts, dramatically stomping back to the corner of the pulpit and squatting low to the ground. It’s the lyric from a strip club anthem, the song directed at strippers dancing for cash, but she’s flipped it into an admonition for the heaven-bound: *Get low to avoid being beaten down by life.*

Then Jones redirects the sermon. She’s responding to the way some people—Christian folks—gossip about TDCM. She’s talking about the way the community-at-large whispers that her church is “The Gay Church.”

“I keep telling you this ain’t a *gay* thing. It’s a *God* thing,” Jones says. Therein lies the mission and founding tenet of Truth & Destiny Covenant Ministries: Everyone is welcome here. The fact that outsiders translate that as “gay church” is a testament to how unwelcome gay and lesbian Christians feel in other churches.

“Some churches make you fill out applications,” Jones points out to her congregation. “They want to know your income and they make you show a W-2, ask you about your roommate,” she says, pantomiming air quotes when she says *roommate*. “Well, how many bedrooms you got?”

This mockery of other, less tolerant congregations draws titters. “God is creating a movement of the radically inclusive,” she tells them. “When we go out into the world we need to be careful that we’re teaching people not what we *think* is right, but what we *know* is right. And that is that God has always been radically inclusive.”

Jones’s proclamation is the antidote to long-held beliefs among some Christians about what constitutes abomination (homosexuality); who goes to hell for it (homosexuals); and even who is welcome in the church (homosexuals generally aren’t, unless they are choir members or musicians). Reconciling faith and sexuality for blacks is no more difficult than it is for white believers. However, blackness can cloud and confound that reconciliation. Some black Christians believe homosexuality is an “attack” on the black family; some feel the fight for gay rights distracts from racial equality; others believe homosexuality is just plain wrong, or it’s “the white man’s problem.” Conversely, progressive black theologians say all discriminatory thought and practice is wrong, and they call for the black church to return to its role as the center of unbiased social and faith works.

Meeting Jones and visiting her church blurs all the right/wrong/heaven/hell absolutes, the judgment, theory, and theology. A conversation with her could be

subtitled “How To Reconcile Faith and Sexuality For Bigoted Dummies.” That’s what her church is about.

But don’t call it “the Gay Church.”

“Pastoring can take a toll on your relationship, especially if you’re pastoring alone,” says Jones. We’re sitting in the cold and cramped supply room that doubles as the church office. She’s dressed casually in a gray T-shirt, loafers, and slacks with a faint pinstripe. In person she is warm and forthcoming, even-keeled and funny. But her pulpit and her personal life have commingled with difficulty. She explains that she and her partner of nine years, Rosa Jones, the woman with whom she founded TDCM, separated in December. (They are now in the process of reconciling.)

“Planning a church is like any other business,” Jones says. “The first five years you work to build.” And in building her church, she says, “one of the things I failed at was publicly acknowledging my spouse.”

In that way, Jones isn’t so different from many mainline pastors who struggle to balance their public and private lives. Except that most pastors don’t have to put so much energy into explaining that what they do is, indeed, the Lord’s work. “Everybody here is not lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, questioning, or queer,” she says. “There are straight folks who are here because the gospel is taught and they believe in inclusion. They also believe in the social justice [work] we do here. We take care of the poor, the sick—and that attracts a lot of people. We purposely don’t wave a [gay] pride flag.”

Further, in the sanctuary there’s no picture of Christ—He of the flowing dark hair, sandals, and robes who could double as a Grateful Dead fan. Why? “We can’t put Jesus up on the wall until we can find a rainbow Jesus of every hue, image, and nationality,” Jones says. “That white male dogma? That’s not the Jesus I know.”

Searching for that Jesus, six years ago Jones and Rosa gathered 20 friends for dinner at their home. “What would your church look like?” the two women asked. Then they scribbled notes on newsprint they hung around the room.

“They wanted a place where their family could be celebrated,” Jones says. “A place where youth and children were valued, a variety in the worship style—a blend of liturgical and freestyle. They wanted a multi-ethnic and multi-racial [church] . . . a place where people valued people. I remember this one,” she recalls. “They said, ‘If I’m not at church, I want someone to miss me.’”

Despite the passion and specificity of those worship wishes, after dinner the pages were rolled up and slid beneath the bed. Jones attended several racially diverse, gay-friendly congregations in Cincinnati, but never felt satisfied. She hungered for something more deeply rooted in the black church tradition of bombast and pageantry. After three years and deep consultation with the Rev. Darlene Franklin, pastor of Full Truth Ministries in Detroit, Michigan’s oldest predominantly black radically inclusive congregation, and with the Rev. Bonnie Daniel, now retired from New Spirit Metropolitan Community Church in Northside, Jones took the next step. She and Rosa started TDCM in 2003 as “a place to worship in the full truth of our life that also met our spiritual needs.”

“I didn’t one day plant myself and just say, ‘I’m gonna pastor me a church,’” Jones jokes. She started her career as a teacher—first in Cincinnati Public Schools and then at Marva Collins Preparatory School in Silverton. Fans of 1320 AM WCVG, a now-defunct gospel station, may remember her; she was the station’s morning show announcer and sales manager from 1995 to 2000. She also worked as a program director at the YMCA. In 2000 she joined the Hamilton County Human Relations Commission, ultimately ascending to director, a post she held until 2006. Jones has a

bachelor's degree in social sciences from Miami University and certificates in ministry and pastoral counseling from Light University, an online pastoral program, but she is also working on a certificate of ministry from New York Theological Seminary, from which she intends to ultimately receive a master's degree in divinity. When people ask about her credentials, she likes to say, "I got a SBG degree—Sent By God!"

A self-described "BaptiMethoCostal," Jones was born in North Carolina but raised off and on in Middletown, where she graduated from Middletown High School. Her father is Baptist, her mother Methodist, and one of her grandmothers was a Pentecostal evangelist. She's the only child of her parents' marriage, but has two teenaged adopted stepbrothers. Coming out to her family was "a challenge," she says; she didn't do it until she was 33. She knew she was gay as a teenager. But she was also sexually curious, and she got pregnant at 19 as a freshman at Kentucky State University. The birth of her son Blake, now a student at Cincinnati State, was her "coming to know Jesus experience," as she calls it.

"I really prayed for a son," she says. "I was reading the story of Hannah and she prayed for a son [Samuel], so I prayed that prayer. It was during a time when I was really being beaten down in the church."

The judgment leveled at her by church members made Jones more spiritually determined. In 1988, when she turned 21, she rededicated her life to Jesus Christ. However, revealing her sexuality to her family didn't come so easily. When she did finally come out to her mother, she did it in a letter. With a letter, she says, "I could say what I needed to say without being interrupted." Her mother's initial reaction was to declare that she was going to have her daughter "kidnapped and deprogrammed." Jones accepted it as an emotional and visceral response to life-altering news. "Although my mother has struggled with who I am, she's come to church, she's participated," she says. Her mother's way of letting Jones know that she was OK with her daughter's sexuality was by bringing Jones's brothers to church, too. "We have to realize our parents are grieving," she says. "They're coming out, too."

Jones, however, has less patience for the myopia of some black ministers and their churches. "They're so comfortable in their chauvinism, [and] in their homophobia," she says. "Misogyny and homophobia [are] prevalent in ministry across the board. They're comfortable with the 'Don't ask/Don't tell' policy."

Jones wants to be part of changing that. She wants her church to make people stand up and take notice. "We're a revolutionary concept," she says. "I believe it's in process."

The chasm between traditional black churches and their gay and lesbian brethren is part of the complicated history of black Christianity in America.

Theologian and author Kelly Brown Douglas, the Elizabeth Connolly Todd Distinguished Professor of Religion at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, knows the subject well. In 1985, Douglas was the first black woman—and only the fifth nationwide—ordained an Episcopal priest in the Southern Ohio Diocese. She is straight, but the Dayton native's path was sometimes made arduous by a black male bishop who "stopped my ordination a few times for no other reason than that I was a woman," she says. She notes that, paradoxically, early black Christians incorporated the oppression, repression, and bigotry they saw in white churches into their own.

"Most black people became Christian during the Great Awakenings, the Evangelical revivals of the late 1700s and the early 1800s," Douglas says. In the Evangelical view, "You had to overcome the passion of the body. Paul's edict in Corinthians—it's better to marry than to burn with passion—speaks to that."

In 1999, Douglas published *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, a seminal text outlining the far-reaching roots of homophobia and sexism throughout

the black faith community. “We must take into account how black people have been caricatured in this country and that is sexualized,” she says. “To be ‘normal sexually’ is to abide by the norms and standards of white patriarchal narratives—however they do it.” And that includes using religion as a weapon of oppression.

“The black church’s own history is ironic,” she says. “They weren’t allowed to be who they are and now they’re not allowing [gay and lesbian] people to be who they are.”

However, the black church clearly is not a monolith. “The ‘capital C’ black Church is made up of multitudinous, disparate churches, diverse by congregational size,” she explains. “You can have megachurches and storefronts; you can have very sedate and very rapturous. It is rural, suburban, urban, AME, CME. What makes black churches part of the black Church is what roots them to history.”

The Rev. Damon Lynch Jr., the brazenly progressive 69-year-old pastor of New Jerusalem Baptist Church in Carthage, a 2,200-member “megachurch,” is one such minister rooted to history. He says that he was galvanized to support and protect gay rights by the historical events that unfolded during his lifetime. “I was fortunate to come along when the country was on fire,” he says. “When the Kings and the Andy Youngs and the Abernathys came to town, I was the one who went to the airport to go get them.”

Lynch sits back in his spacious church office, its walls crammed with images: Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., framed clips of Lynch marching, several city proclamations, and a strange photo of Lynch and the Rev. Donald Jordan stiffly flanking George W. Bush. “I’ve been a proponent for gay rights for years—during the days when this city was intolerant,” says Lynch. “Me coming up in Cincinnati and Georgia before that, I know what that was about. Discrimination of any kind isn’t right.”

From 1996 to 1999, Lynch was president of the Baptist Ministers’ Conference of Greater Cincinnati and Vicinity. Lynch would intermittently come to public loggerheads with the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, the proudly conservative civil rights stalwart who has opposed gay rights. The disagreement reached its apex in the battle over Cincinnati’s human rights ordinance, which culminated in 2004 with the repeal of Article XII, the city’s so-called “anti-gay amendment.”

“I became the bad guy within the black ministers,” Lynch recalls. “‘Reverend—you go out there for those homosexuals and those sissies!’” he adds, mocking black preachers who questioned his loyalties. “Shuttlesworth was saying, ‘If Martin was alive, he’d be siding with us.’ Miss Coretta King came here and said, ‘That’s not true, Fred,’” his voice affecting that of a genteel southern woman’s.

Despite some public grilling for his beliefs, Lynch doesn’t mince words about the homophobia still rampant in some black churches. “I think we’re the most homophobic going,” he says. “We can be as liberal as we wanna be on social issues but when it comes to sexuality issues, we’re hypocrites.”

Lynch says Jones has visited his church; he also knows her because of her involvement with the Human Relations Commission. Her work is “exemplary,” he says. “It’s impeccable.”

In Lynch’s view, there are black preachers who are simply stultified by their own homophobia. Scripture in their hands is a tactic. “The Bible says ‘unequally yoked’ and it has nothing to do with sexuality, it has to do with unbelievers,” he says. “But they will take it and make it any other thing.”

Like Brown-Douglas, Lynch weaves the ugly dangling threads between black homophobia and white supremacy. “White folks used [religion] against black and white,” he says. “When people are working out of emotion and don’t know the Bible, you’ve got a helluva problem on your hands.”

For her own support and continued growth, Jones attends a Bible study every Monday along with eight theologians—all female. She says being a woman in the black church is as groundbreaking as being a lesbian, but it's those inherent differences that make women (gay or straight) effective church leaders.

"Women bring balance to the church when they're in leadership roles. Pastoring among men is mainly competitive. In the black church you're not considered a great preacher unless you can tune"—an old-school, singsong-y practice that blends preaching with singing. "Women tend to be more theologically sound because they have something to prove. Men compete: 'How big is your church?' That size thing is for real," she says. "Being women in the church allows us to be more sensitive. Women bring a balance to that hard, direct kind of way and we balance men in their competitiveness."

Jones feels that women have historically been "unwelcome" in the pulpit. She cites Isaiah 54, an account of "the future glory of Zion," which begins: "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child."

"[There] we'll get into the unwelcome, the unclean, the unproven," she says, paraphrasing Isaiah 56: 3–5. "God speaks to the eunuch and says, *Because of your faithfulness I will make your home greater than my sons and daughters in Israel*. When I read that, God obviously was looking for something different in the heart of man. That's where my faith journey toward God really speaks to me. As a woman I've been relegated to second-class citizen in the church."

TDCM is part of The Fellowship, a 100-member trans-denominational network of congregations practicing radical inclusion. It's led by Bishop Yvette Flunder, pastor of San Francisco's City of Refuge Church. Terry Hocker, TDCM's associate pastor, sees Jones taking a leadership role in an organization like The Fellowship, perhaps even becoming a bishop herself. "When I look at it from the outside, yes, I believe [TDCM] is revolutionary," Hocker says. "It is the stuff denominations are made of."

For Jones, a woman whose church started in her heart and then her living room, it's a noteworthy progression. The historical ramifications of being in the vanguard of a fledgling movement with such personal investments at stake aren't lost on her. "We're forerunners in this," she says. "I don't think the congregation has gotten it yet, but we're on the cusp."

She believes that ultimately other people of faith will open the doors of their sanctuaries to this new idea and to the brothers and sisters they've cast aside. "I can still go to a Baptist church and meet Jesus in my heart," she says. "But if my heart doesn't change about people, I'll never see the people for who they are."

Kathy Y. Wilson. Originally published in the July 2008 issue of *Cincinnati Magazine*.

➤ Richard Thompson Ford

(2007), United States

"What's Queer about Race?"

When I announced my engagement to be married, almost everyone offered the obligatory congratulations and best wishes and left it at that. Marriage is, of course, a social ritual of script and conscription—there is a very limited range of polite reactions one can have to the announcement of a marriage engagement. Decidedly not among

them: “Married? You’re *getting married*? Hold on a minute, I need a drink.” This was precisely the reaction of a very dear friend to my happy news. But I was expecting it. She, a scholar who had studied the institution with the beady-eyed, corrosive curiosity of a coroner establishing the cause of a death, was a rare critic (not to say *opponent*) of marriage. She knew more about matrimony than most—certainly more than I. My impression was less that she thought I was making a life-altering and potentially catastrophic mistake, like enlisting in the Marine Corps—though she may have thought that too—than that I was taking the safe and boring way out. “I’d always thought of you two as a hip unmarried couple,” she mused.

Later, this same friend was visiting and noticed our “engagement photos.” (For the uninitiated: these are photos of the happy couple in staged romantic natural settings and vaguely suggestive “candid” poses; intended to convey to the viewer the dewy optimism of love’s first bloom, they customarily involve beaches at sunset, sylvan landscapes, and the couple gazing longingly into each other’s eyes or lounging in precoital bliss.) To the chagrin of our wedding photographer, we insisted on taking ours at a bar, martinis in hand, evoking companionship, we thought, but also insisting on the cosmopolitan and profane side of the erotic—more film noir than romantic comedy. The photos were in black and white, a medium suited to invoke instant nostalgia and to highlight stark contrasts in tone, such as the black bar top and the white cocktail napkins, the reflective gleam of the silver shaker and the light-absorbing matte black of a leather jacket, or the deep chestnut tone of my skin and the almost luminescent blond peach of hers. My friend (let’s call her “Janet”) scrutinized the photos and then remarked, approvingly, “You *really are* an interracial couple. It’s easy to forget because I know you so well, but looking at this picture. . . . It’s still pretty transgressive, isn’t it?”

I take it as almost axiomatic that queer theory embraces, even celebrates transgression; it seeks the sublime not in resistance—that’s too damn bristly and self-serious—but in blithe and gleeful disregard for social convention. While its matronly stepsister gay rights wants equal access to mainstream social conventions—however ramshackle and dilapidated or procrustean they may be—queer theory is interested in shaking them up so we can see which ones aren’t fit for human habitation. The normalization strategy of gay rights is to merge so seamlessly and imperceptibly into mainstream institutions that it seems impossible to imagine it could ever have been any other way; by contrast, queer theory opts for bullying, razzing, and mocking social conventions until it’s hard to imagine them in the same way. So queer theory has always had a potentially broad applicability. If gay rights would say of marriage, “You have it; why shouldn’t we?” (an uninteresting claim, but one that’s hard to argue with), queer theory would say, “Married? You’re getting *married*? Hold on a minute, I need a drink.”

The not-too-subtle insinuation that marriage—not its hetero-exclusivity but marriage itself—might be the appropriate target of critique makes queer theory portable to foreign and exotic social contexts in a way that gay rights discourse cannot be. Despite what right-wing paranoiacs like Tom DeLay might believe, gay marriage really has little to do with my heterosexual marriage one way or the other. By contrast, a queer theory critique of marriage generally applies to me and mine as much as to Ellen DeGeneres and Rosie O’Donnell.

But why stop there? After all, marriage is a sitting duck; as Laura Kipnis points out, its critique is almost as much a part of the culture as its incessant celebration—before lit-crit attacks on holy matrimony, there was Al Bundy, before him Jackie Gleason,

Henry VIII, Agamemnon.¹ No, queer theory's radical attack targets not marriage, but identity. Here's what Janet Halley has written apropos:

One is a lesbian not because of anything in oneself, but because of social interactions, or the desire for social interactions: it takes two women . . . to make a lesbian. . . . Similar things can be said about gay men, homosexuals, bisexuals . . . transvestite . . . transsexual/ transgendered people . . . and sexual dissidents of various . . . descriptions. Even more complex challenges to the coherentist assumptions about identity politics emerge when attention focuses on the question of the merger, exile, coalition, and secession of these constituencies. . . . Sexual orientation and sexuality movements are perhaps unique among contemporary identity movements in harboring an unforgivingly corrosive critique of identity itself. . . . The term "queer" was adopted by some movement participants in part to frustrate identity formation around dissident sexualities.²

So *queer* denotes not an identity but instead a political and existential stance, an ideological commitment, a *decision* to live outside some social norm or other. At the risk (the certainty) of oversimplification, one could say that even if one is born straight or gay, one must decide to be queer.

Queer theory's anti-identitarianism is the key to its portability: just as the queer critique targets marriage generally—not just its straights-only exclusivity—so too the queer critique of (nominally) gay identity politics would seem to apply to identity politics generally. If gay identity is problematic and subject to a corrosive critique, mightn't other social identities be as well? Obviously, the next domino vulnerable to toppling is gender. It's easy enough to read some aspects of gay, lesbian, and transgendered politics as partially—perhaps even fundamentally—critical of gender identity. And as Halley suggests, this is potentially disruptive of other identities: doesn't a critique of gender destabilize the woman-in-a-man's-body/man-in-a-woman's-body idea of transsexual identity? Unlike Judith Butler's idea of drag as resistance to gender identity,³ the goal of this type of transsexual identity is not to do gender badly but to do it well; indeed, to *get it right*, to correct nature's mistake and make the body correspond to an intrinsically gendered soul. But, of course, the idea that gender is something one could get right is anathema to much of modern sexuality discourse as well as much of modern feminism. It would seem that one can't take both the critique of gender and the man-in-a-woman's-body transgender identity seriously. Bye-bye, mutually supportive coalition politics; hello, civil war.

As our row of dominos succumbs to gravity, racial identity has been the last to fall. Why the last? Unlike sex difference, which is still widely taken for granted as real, biologically determined, fixed, and intrinsic, it is now widely acknowledged that racial identity is fictitious: the political Right now champions a norm of color blindness, while the postmodern Left insists that race is a social and ideological construction. So

¹Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).

²Janet E. Halley, "'Like Race' Arguments," in *What's Left of Theory: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2000), 41.

³Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

one would expect a critique of racial identity politics to follow hard on the stilettos of queer theory's critique of sexual identity politics.

But racial identity has proven remarkably resistant to critique. Even hard-core social constructionists backpedal, hastening to add to their critiques the caveat that racial identities—however constructed and inessential—are the product of the “real lived experience” of racial discrimination, of social and political communities, and of distinctive cultural norms, all of which are, of course, as real as the hand in front of your face (which is poised to bitch-slap you if you deny it), even if race itself isn't. And while the Right sings a stridently anti-identitarian gospel of “color blindness” when resisting affirmative action, they change their tune when it comes to profiling criminals, diagnosing diseases, or choosing spouses.

The resulting schizoid relationship to race is the stuff of farce. Race-conscious progressives insist that generalizations about race are valid for purposes of university admissions but not for stopping terrorists from boarding commercial aircraft or interdicting drug couriers on the nation's freeways; conservatives insist just the opposite. Advocates of multiracial identity beat up relentlessly on racial essentialism when pressed to choose one and only one race, but their solution is to insist on multiracial categories and designations to reflect their “true” racial identity.

So Left and Right have an interest in protecting racial identity, albeit for different purposes. And also for the same purposes: an unexamined psychological commitment to race as an intrinsic identity motivates Left identity politics and the right-wing bigotry underlying *The Bell Curve* or William Bennett's offhand suggestion that the crime rate would drop if all black infants were aborted.⁴ Most people want to believe that races are real. It seems that race, like the presumption of innocence, the Hippocratic oath, or “till death do us part,” is too useful a fiction to dispense with.

Racial identity, like sex identity, comes with a set of norms attached; there are (politically) correct ways of exhibiting black, Asian, Latino, and white race—what Anthony Appiah calls racial “scripts”⁵—just as there are established norms for male and female gender. As with gender, many of these norms are very difficult to distinguish from common stereotypes. In socially fluid and insecure environments—cities, large corporations, universities—conventional racial scripts enjoy a magnetic pull. Strangers need easy sources of identification. Alienated and isolated individuals crave belonging. Race supplies these: provided everyone keeps to the script, you can count on a community in almost any unfamiliar setting. Just as an American tourist seeks out McDonald's for a reliable taste of home, so too people look for standardized racial norms as an anchor in alien territory—safe, predictable, comforting.

But maybe not all that healthy. And definitely not all that interesting.

Cruising along at high speed on the momentum of the canon wars, by the 1990s multiculturalism had influenced Left liberal legal theory in a big way. Civil rights law reform proposals had taken a sharp identitarian turn; the vogue was to emphasize the ineluctable nature of group cultural difference and insist that law should account for, embrace, and enforce it. According to a raft of law review articles written since the early 1990s, race discrimination laws should be expanded to require employers to

⁴Richard Herrnstein and Charles J. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994); William Bennett, Morning in America, radio program, September 28, 2005.

⁵Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 160–61.

accommodate racially specific cultural and social practices. The logic of these proposals consistently asserted the unambiguous and uncomplicated relationship between race and behavior: racial scripts exist, and to resist or challenge them—even to neglect them—is invidious discrimination on the basis of race.

Queer theory's destabilizing agenda offered me a way to resist the super-sizing of identity politics at a moment when it seemed at its most preeminent. In my recent book *Racial Culture*,⁶ I advanced an attack from the Left on racial identity politics in legal theory. I argued that the cultural rights law reform proposals either asserted or implied a "repressive hypothesis" that assumed that racial power was exercised exclusively in the attempt to censor or repress expressions of racial difference. Following Foucault, I insisted that this conception of power was inadequate: the production of racial expression and racial norms was also an exercise of power, one made all the more potent by its ability to blend into a background landscape of seemingly unregulated and voluntary family and leisure-time social relationships. Stripped of this naturalistic camouflage, politically correct norms of racial conduct could be seen as mechanisms of coercion:

The necessary correlative to this unearned solidarity is an unwarranted presumption about the entailments of group membership. There is a peculiar variant of political correctness, one that regulates, not what can be said about a minority group by outsiders, but instead the behavior of group members. This political correctness requires and duly produces opprobrium for people who miss their cue: we encounter "Oreos"—blacks on the outside who don't "act black" and therefore presumably aren't black "on the inside"—and quickly enough other racial groups acquire similar figures (for some odd reason all refer to food): Asian "bananas," Latino "coconuts," Native American "apples." These figures of scorn imply that there is a particular type of behavior that is appropriate to a given race, and thereby censure deviation from it. (39–40)

Racial Culture's approach to questions of race and racial justice was heavily influenced by queer theory. Queer theory not only offered a new theoretical frame within which to understand and analyze the often severely coercive aspects of Left liberal racial identity politics; just as important, it also offered an alternative attitude, tone, or "stance" to occupy in relation to it. As I argued, "One of the most effectively spellbinding aspects of [identity politics] has been its somber and weighty sanctimoniousness, which has intimidated those who might puncture its pretensions and deterred deserved critique" (211). Pretentious and preachy diction has become one of the hallmarks of identity politics scholarship. The hushed and respectful tones of the cemetery and the sonorous oratory of the pulpit both serve an important rhetorical function: to preempt from the outset the possibility that what is being said might be trivial or laughable. Worse yet, the etiquette of the funeral and of the sermon rules out the important stylistic mode of playfulness, the devices of satire and lampoon, the analytics of irony, and the aesthetics of wit.

Queer theory offered me an alternative mode—indeed, an antagonistic mode—of engagement with identity politics scholarship and with racial identity itself. Rather than a Hobson's choice between polite and reserved acquiescence—a sort of forced

⁶Richard Thompson Ford, *Racial Culture: A Critique* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.

conscripted into institutions of social regulation—or a shrill and angry reaction, queer theory offered a third way, one I find liberating and creative. Instead of insincere congratulations and best wishes or angry denunciation, one could begin by reaching for the Jack Daniels and highball glass.

Modern identity politics has old and deep roots, but it blossomed in the social movements of the 1960s. The politics of the new Left became institutionalized in law reform, in the academy, and in the set of prescriptions and admonishments that travel under the title “Morality.” This is by and large a success story, but it has a melancholy subplot. The energy, joy, sexiness, and fun of the counterculture was largely—perhaps inevitably—stripped away as the politics of the new Left became mainstream. Ideas became dogmas, rebellion was reduced to rules, commitments became cages. The mainstreaming of identity politics made it routine rather than spontaneous; made it more prescriptive and less liberating; swapped the tang of volunteerism for the bland flavor of obligation.

And, perhaps worst of all, academic identity politics became the domain of the expert. As the term *political correctness* suggests, identity politics developed an increasingly intricate sense of decorum: there was a right way to go about things and a million ways for the novice and the dilettante to screw up. The controversies over terminology were the most striking example of this preciousness. Quick, which is correct: Negro, Black, black, Afro-American, African American, colored person, person of color? Gay, queer, gay men and lesbians, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered? Ladies, women, womyn? Is the gendered pronoun okay? S/he (or does that suggest the female gender is just adjunctive to the male)? He/she? It? Maybe it’s better that you just sit in the back of the room and listen. The acknowledged message behind all of this correctness was loud and clear: social justice was the domain of the professional—don’t try this at home, kids.

Queer theory offered a way to take race politics back from the professionals. It had—at least it seemed to me—a closer and fresher connection with the everyday life of a counterculture, with its contradictions, its sweaty struggles, its passions, its screwups, its street styles and fashion faux pas. Queer theory, with its open-handed conflicts and negotiations between gay men, lesbians, trannies, butch and lipstick lesbians, tops, bottoms, clean-shaven Chelsea boys and bearded burly “bears,” felt like London’s music scene in 1979, with its allied, agonistic, and frantically creative relationship between punks, mod revivalists, teddys, skinheads, rude boys, two-tones, new romantics. By contrast, the bloated academic conventions of race and gender identity politics slipped into self-parody worthy of Spinal Tap; the scripted rebellion of the academic new Left looked as uncomfortable as Bob Dylan in a tuxedo. My ambition in *Racial Culture* was to write about race without regard to the professional conventions of the genre—to just grab a guitar and play what sounded good. I wanted to say all of the things I had always thought and then censored, without regard to whether they would be received as “liberal” or “conservative”; I wanted to ignore orthodoxies—not self-consciously challenge them but just write as if they weren’t relevant.

So queer theory offered three tools important to my work: the substantive critique of identity; critique as a *style* (much in the way Susan Sontag famously described camp as a style,⁷ and with many affinities—satire, lampoon, irony, and wit) that could be used

⁷Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966; New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 275–92.

in discussing serious political and social questions; and the liberation from professional orthodoxies: the virtues of apostasy over piety, the productive clash of ideas being worked out, “cults” being formed and broken apart, the energy of an avant-garde (to use an archaic term) in constant motion. That’s better than any wedding gift I can imagine.

Ford, Richard Thompson. 2007. “What’s Queer about Race?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106(3): 477-84.

➤ Sonnet Gabbard

(2012), United States

“Preserving the Nation: Transitional Serbia, the European Union, and Homophobia”

October 2, 2011 stood to be yet another litmus test for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights in Serbia. Could Belgrade’s LGBT communities safely gather publicly for a second consecutive Gay Pride Parade? One year earlier, LGBT community members, activists, and allies held the first Gay Pride Parade in ten years. While the freedom to gather publicly and protection from Serbian police were certainly steps forward for LGBT rights, participants and the police protecting them faced violent outbursts in 2010 from homophobic soccer hooligans and nationalists. Organizers were anxiously awaiting the parade, hoping that the negative aspects of 2010 would be assuaged, given support from the European Union, international aid and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Ministry of Interior, and local human rights activists and organizations. Unfortunately, October 2, 2011 came and went without a Pride Parade in Belgrade. The week leading up to the event, the Minister of Interior, a former member of Slobodan Milosevic’s party¹, announced that his forces would not and could not protect Pride participants from potential anti-gay violence, thus motivating the Serbian parliament to ban the parade.² European Union members and delegates were all but silent³. After nearly a year of preparation and anticipation, Pride organizers and participants were left to decide whether to move forward with the already planned parade in spite of its attendant insecurities. Rather than having a formal pride event without police protection, the group decided to do a visibility action by walking to the square. The event lasted only an hour, and was not well attended. The sudden cancellation was a blow to LGBT activists and organizers, particularly considering the strides for LGBT rights that had been made during the previous year.

¹Ivica Dačić, along with the first openly gay Serbian politician, Boris Milicevic, is a member of the Socialist Democratic Party.

²CNN Staff Writer. “Serb Authorities Prohibit Gay Pride Parade.” *CNN.com*. Accessed October 2, 2011. <<http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/01/world/europe/serbia-gay-pride/>>

³In fact, the reaction from the EU delegation was tepid at best. The head of the EU delegation, Vincent Degert, said to the Serb radio station B92, “There is no condition for Serbia to hold one, two, five or ten parades in order to join the EU. That’s not the way we think.” “Pride Parade not condition for EU – EU rep.” B92. 26 Sept. 2011. Web. 12 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2011>>.

The homophobic rhetoric and threats of antigay violence surrounding the 2010 and 2011 Belgrade Gay Pride Parades serve as a snapshot of the many challenges facing LGBT communities in Serbia, and reflect the broader “gender norms”⁴ crisis underway in the post-conflict transition⁵. Not only are community members under regular attack by nationalist and right-wing leaders, they are also constantly negotiating a somewhat precarious relationship with the Serbian government. The government wavers in its support for gay rights by implementing laws and policies in-name-only in order to line up with neoliberal-inspired European Union mandates and policy recommendations.⁶ As one Serbian LGBT activist put it, “the [2010] pride parade was a really significant event because for the first time there was a successful public showing of differences in a collective manner. It was a success because it happened, it occurred. It wasn’t a success at the same time because there were a lot of attacks. . .so it was like a war zone. . . but it happened.”⁷ In this sense, LGBT responses to homophobic violence in post-conflict Serbia offer two inter-related sets of dilemmas. First, the way in which heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality are understood and negotiated in Serbia reflects a broader set of transnational disputes concerning “the family” underway throughout the world today. From the passage of same-sex partner recognition policies in both the global North and South (e.g., Netherlands, Canada, South Africa, Argentina), to homophobic state responses including the near passage of the death penalty for individuals considered “homosexual” in Uganda, homosexuality itself has become a terrain of dispute in broader struggles concerning national sovereignty, democratization and transitional justice. This is indeed the case in Serbia, a country undergoing dramatic political and economic change following an intense period of conflict. Second, and in relation to this, the Serbian state is simultaneously contending with nationalism (which tends to be protectionist and inward-looking) and economic/political integration into the EU (which tends to orient the state and nation outwards, to the regional/global market and global political community). In Serbia, as elsewhere, struggles concerning “the family” are heightened in an increasingly hyper-heteronormative nation, one that

⁴By gender norms crisis I am referring to the tensions brought about by Serbia’s integration into the European Union. This state of transition has created new forms of xenophobia and homophobia by highlighting the EU’s entry requirements, such as Serbia’s adoption of equal rights laws for the LGBT community. Thus, joining the EU has triggered resurgence in a hetero-centric pro-family agenda for many, resulting in a perceived need to reestablish traditional masculine and feminine roles and a heterosexual nuclear family structure.

⁵Following nearly a decade of armed conflict, Serbia is now in a post-conflict state, and transitioning from an authoritarian socialist governance and economic structure to a neoliberalized democracy and economy. Serbia’s application to join the European Union is one example of the ways in which the country is attempting to shed its socialist and conflict-riddled past and become a part of a neoliberal democratic and economic entity.

⁶Amy Lind provides a working definition of neoliberalism: “‘Neoliberalism’ is not easy to define. This is so, I have found, because neoliberalism does not refer only to a set of economic policies—as some might believe—but rather to a political strategy which relies upon an ideology of the market and implementing a certain set of policies.” Amy Lind, “Making Feminist Sense of Neoliberalism: The Institutionalization of Women’s Struggles for Survival in Ecuador and Bolivia.” *Journal of Developing Societies* 18.2-3 (2002): 228-58.

⁷See Nenad Popovic interview transcript.

seeks to define itself as “different from” the “imposing” EU. The EU’s top-down policy recommendations and suggested strategies for implementation of equal and human rights⁸ create a dualistic, contradictory result for Serbia’s LGBT communities. While the EU’s mandates for equal rights and protection create space for public dialogue, recognition, and potential “security” for LGBT communities, the disconnect between public policy and public opinion has created an increase in anti-gay rhetoric and violence.

Focusing on post-conflict transitional Serbian society allows me to examine the lasting effects of war, militarism, and nationalism not only on those who fought in and were victims of the conflicts, but also on the civilians who survived the war. Therefore it is imperative to discuss post-conflict Serbian civil society, especially the challenges and changes confronting the women’s movement and newly targeted groups such as gays and lesbians, in light of historic nationalism and Serbia’s bid to join the European Union and generally “integrate” its economy into the global market.

Coupled with both governmental transitions, Serbia’s economy has experienced a wave of transnational neoliberal capitalist investment over the past few years. What was formerly a somewhat isolated socialist economy is swiftly becoming a liberalized economy with foreign investors at the helm.⁹ Together with the rise in privatization of industry is the elevating of the importance of civil society to the democratization of Serbia both on the local level and through foreign aid and development. While this trend to privatize industry and promote welfare through privately funded civil society is not unique to countries in transition¹⁰, what is particularly striking about the Serbian case are the various vehicles¹¹ being used to promote neoliberalism. For example, the European Union strongly encourages the passing of certain types of laws in an effort to “democratize” Serbia, such as anti-discrimination laws, with the carrot being entry into new economic markets.

Nationalism and the Rise of Homophobia in Serbia

In order to understand Serbia’s unique transitional state, a brief historical context is needed. A decade following the most recent bloody ethnic conflict in Kosovo, the breakup and wars in the former Yugoslavia¹² (and the arrest and trial of the former Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević for war crimes) Serbia is slowly rebuilding. During this time of transition, many women’s organizations and lesbian and gay organizations have reported a continuance of ultra-nationalism and xenophobic radicalism (Bakić 2009). Despite these ugly trends, the Serbian government is making attempts to transition towards international recognition as a peaceful democracy with hopes of joining the EU, as demonstrated by their recent cooperation with the search, arrest, and finally handover to the International Court of Justice in The Hague of Radovan

⁸E.g. Serbian Parliament’s passing and implementation of the non-discrimination acts, organizing of the Serbian Gay Pride Parades, and other attempts to create and implement equal rights legislation.

⁹See Zoran Ristić. “Privatisation and Foreign Direct Investment in Serbia.” *South-East Europe Review* (2004): 121-36.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²For more information on the most recent Balkan Wars see Silber and Little. *The Death of Yugoslavia*. London: BBC Books, 1996.

Karadžić, Ratko Mladić, and Goran Hadžić¹³ following years of pressure from the international community. Proponents of joining the European Union argue that becoming a member would create significant improvement to Serbia's post-socialist economy. In addition to the economic gains, supporters also argue that entry to EU would further legitimize Serbian democracy and help reposition the state from a post-conflict society to a fully functioning democracy.

Serbia is on the brink of major change of status in the international community. While these efforts symbolize a break from the ultra-nationalist past, Serbia is still wrestling with waves of radical nationalism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia. Political scientist Sarah Correia discusses the rise in nationalism in Serbia among Serbian youth, saying, "Extremist right-wing groups define themselves as 'patriots' defending national independence and integrity both from outside threats and internal denigration" (Correia 2010). With the promise of EU integration looming, there has been a resurgence in efforts to preserve the national identity, and by extension, to promote reinvestment in the "national family." We see this manifested in Serbian nationalist rhetoric of "family values" coupled with homophobic sentiments.

Serbian politicians have hardly welcomed EU pressure to integrate LGBT rights into Serbian government. This is particularly evident in looking at politicians' public statements to Serb media outlets. Labris, one of Serbia's oldest lesbian organizations, published a report on the status of the LGBT population in Serbia in 2010 looking specifically at the media coverage of the 2010 Belgrade Pride Parade. The report serves as a snapshot of some of the opponents to LGBT rights and the challenges imposed on individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender in Serbia. In their analysis of the media coverage of the Pride Parade, Labris writes that prior to 2010, most news stories focusing on LGBT issues appeared in *Entertainment* sections. However, in the months leading up to and following the 2010 Pride Parade, LGBT issues gravitated to *Politics and Society* columns. This movement represents a shift in the overall social and cultural dialogue around recognition and legitimization of LGBT politics and issues. That being said, the report is quick to point out that overall balance and representation of both LGBT communities and anti-gay forces is lacking (Labris report 2010: 9). According to the report, homophobic discourse was increasingly reported in the months leading up to the Parade, with few responses solicited from LGBT organizations or community members. One frequent topic was the homophobic rant *du jour* from Dragan Marković Palma ("Palma"), president of the parliamentary party Serbia United and mayor of the Central Serbian city, Jagodina. When asked about his opposition to the Pride Parade, Palma said:

"[My political party] is opposed to displays of sexual orientation in public places. One of the most democratic countries—France, has recently banned the wearing of the burqa in public places, although it is the Muslim tradition for over 1,000 years. Do we really have to agree to something that has no tradition whatsoever? Since when is it considered a Serbian brand for men in thongs and vibrators to strut around in the streets. I have nothing against them doing what they please within their own four walls, let them rent a convention space and do what they want. This has nothing to do with the violation of human rights,

¹³The Bosnian Serb war criminals charged with engineering and leading the execution of unarmed Muslim Bosniak men and boys in Srebrenica, Bosnia during the war.

seeing how the gay parade was banned in Moscow last year. This has everything to do with mocking the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian people, and we at JS cannot ban the parade, but we will not support it either" (Palma, Alo, July 26, 2010, Labris publication 10).

Here Palma is attempting to compare Serbian politics to French secularism while in the same breath drawing on notions of Serbian religious tradition. Additionally, his desire to contain what he interprets as blatant displays of non-heterosexual love and desire for private spaces further supports the fundamental purpose of Pride Parades, that is, to promote political, social, and cultural visibility, to come out of various metaphorical closets.

As the Labris report mentions, Palma was not alone in 2010 in his anti-gay sentiments. According to the report, media outlets regularly published homophobic slurs by Serbian politicians, such as Jovan Marić's statement that the parade "significantly demolishes the traditional values of the traditional values of the Serbian people, the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch are against it, and the Patriarch has the last say" (Dnevnik September 26, 2010, Labris report 2010:10). Bora Đjodević's more aggressive statement to Kurir borders on hate speech: "I have nothing against fags, I apologize for using that old term for them, but let them fuck in the ass at home. Dick in the ass till they rupture, it's totally fine, it's gay culture. . ." (Kurir, October 3, 2010, Labris report 2010 10). These examples demonstrate that homophobia is still rampant in Serbian politics and culture.

It is important to note that sentiments similar to Đjodević's, Palma's, and Marić's are not new to Serbian political and public discourse regarding LGBT issues. Irene Dioli writes, "LGBTIQ individuals in (former) Yugoslavia have a history of being denied a space—first because of the invisibility cloak forced upon them (socially and legally) during the socialist regime, and then because of hegemonic nationalistic ideologies enforcing the traditional hierarchic gender binary and preventing or limiting, with propaganda as well as sheer violence, the safe, natural expression of sexual diversity" (Dioli 2009: 1). Dioli's account highlights the wave-like process whereby homophobia has afflicted Serbian society. What began as keeping LGBT individuals and identities in the closet during socialist Yugoslavia has morphed into a new form of homophobia couched in preserving an ultra-nationalist notion of Serb identity. That which threatens the proliferation of the Serb race (whether it be Serb integration into the EU, non-Serbs, or LGBT individuals) faces resistance.

Dioli posits that Yugoslavia's gendered violence during the ethnic conflicts has further solidified hyper-gendered norms and expectations, which grew out of militarism, violence, and propaganda. In referring to the post-Yugoslav states (such as Serbia), she writes, "In the former Yugoslav context, the rise of nationalist trends after the demise of Yugoslavia and the ethnically framed wars of the nineties have violently brought normative gender enforcement to the surface of public discourse" (Dioli 2009: 3). Dioli's recognition of the relationship among militarism, war, and gender norms is useful, particularly when considering the rhetoric ultra-nationalists use to stoke both anti-gay and anti-EU fires. The same people who regularly use xenophobic language, warning of foreigners, Albanians, Muslims, Croats, Roma, homosexuals, etc. as threats to the Serb nation, are those who had ties to Serb paramilitaries and nationalist leaders during the wars.

The case of transitional Serbia and LGBT rights is just one slice of a broader consideration of the "globalization of homophobia" (Bosia and Weiss, forthcoming). It is important to inject a sexuality studies perspective into the debates surrounding post-conflict studies and nationalism. I attempt to do so in three ways. First,

I incorporate theories on nationalism, violence, and extremism developed during the ethnic conflicts and apply them to a post-conflict society, where, as evidenced by the recent outbreak of violence against the Serb LGBT community, they are still pertinent. Second, foregrounding emergent theories of feminist security studies, transitional justice theory, and gender and sexual violence, I inject a gender and sexuality perspective into discussions regarding Serbia's transition into EU membership, which has the potential to influence policy for the betterment of women and the LGBT community. Third, I hope to reframe international discussions of peace transformation and extreme nationalism towards a gender and sexuality perspective. Considering the number of nations coming out of ethnic and sectarian violence and on the brink of peace, the findings in my analysis could possibly help provide suggestions for transitioning into a peaceful inclusive society.

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