

Diversity's New Quest(ions)

In the dark windowglass
a blurred face
– is it still *mine*?

Who out there hoped to change me –
what out there has tried?

What sways and presses against the pane
what can't I see beyond or through –

charred, crumpled, ever-changing human language
is that still *you*?

From "A Long Conversation," Adrienne Rich, 1999, p. 69

By Victoria I. Muñoz

The poem on the facing page is the final section of a long conversation Adrienne Rich begins in her new book of poems, *Midnight Salvage*. Rich presses us to wonder how language changes, and changes us, as we speak with each other in that difficult quest to understand what it's like to be you, to be him, to be her, to be me in those places we have never occupied or even wanted to visit. Perhaps we have tried to understand each other in our own private conversations inside our heads: All the parts of the dialogue orchestrated within us. But this conversation needs to begin between us as well. This is the process of salvage that Rich is calling us to now. She has, all her life, insisted that we rescue what we have in common. Listen. Question. Listen. To understand the life of those who have few liberties, the barest of what others take for granted, and to understand ourselves within our own constraints and privileges. To struggle for what it is we desire.

Marriage, for example, and the safety of children playing easily on the lawn without fear of slurs being hurled at them from passing cars, from people who pass as human. Not standing out in a crowd, a target, but instead just being attractive, beautiful, handsome. Not looking queer in all the ways that word is understood. Not being stared at. No voices in your head of how you look like a gang member, a drag king, or a freak. Not being found disgusting. Not being hated. Or the question of "Are you a boy or girl?" being simple to answer. Rarely, if ever, having used the vocabulary of heterosexuality in the ways it is traditionally invoked (but, of course, whose tradition is always the question): My wife, my husband, strange words belonging to a foreign language of relationships but still conjuring roles that are, in fact, open to all of us if we choose to live within them.

Earlier in the poem, Rich brings forth a certain kind of despair that accompanies journeys into the unknown which promise great things at the beginning but offer at the end only what is gleaned from introspection. In our own conversation you ask, "Empty handed and confused don't we still venture forth eager, hopeful, willing to learn? Willing to try friendship. Isn't this the way we push back bitterness?" Rich provides an answer.

Sometime looking backward
into this future, straining
neck and eyes I'll meet your shadow
with its enormous eyes
you who will want to know
what this is all about

*Maybe this is the beginning of madness
Maybe it's your conscience...*

as you, straining neck and eyes
gaze forward into this past:
what did it mean to you?
— to receive "full human rights"
or the blue aperture of hope? (p. 55)

"What might be learned from this long conversation? Isn't the question of full human rights the central question of our time? Can you agree to this?" you ask. Maybe it is a matter of conscience or maybe it is a matter of madness. Either way, it is a dialogue that will bring us to a place that we do not yet dare to visit. But here we stand, like Luther at the brink of the Reformation, with something to say, something that needs nailing down in new ways. Sigmund Freud conceptualized learning something new as a psychological "working through." Deborah Britzman (1998) writes of unlearning, which is to say; learning something new requires that we unlearn what we knew before. "Can we *unlearn* prejudice? Can we *work through* bigotry?" I wonder.

Sensibility and awareness

The next question is yours: "How do you, how does anyone, include a gay sensibility? A way of looking at things that is aware of, that can recognize, how life feels to someone who is gay?" I want to answer your question because you look so earnest but it is not an easy task. You raise two issues, first the issue of sensibility, second the issue of awareness, being conscious, being awake. The two are closely related but different enough to take up separately at first.

Sensibility: Do you mean an aesthetic? Do you mean a feeling toward the appreciation of the beauty in something? The way Barbara McClintock had a "feeling for the organism?" (Fox Keller, 1984). McClintock had a sensibility that was acutely aware of biological possibilities. Jumping genes and big corn

chromosomes were her closest friends and she did not hesitate to love those rows of corn and walk them. All the while having a sense of its rightness, that what she was pursuing would take her somewhere others would follow even though at the time she was alone in those fields looking fiercely at what others would not see. Does sensibility toward the new demand a tolerance for solitude? Does it demand the willingness to converse only with yourself for long periods of time?

We might begin simply with a question, “Who are you?” Answers would cover all sorts of things, a Wells woman, a woman, a straight woman, a semi-straight woman who is white and middle-class, a working class straight woman, a wife and mother, a woman, a woman who is loved and happy, a woman who is a human being who doesn’t like labels, a woman who... A woman. This is already problematic and we’ve only just begun to talk. What is “a woman?”

Awareness: Psychology is very good with the concept of awareness and offers many interpretations of what this process entails. Being aware and being conscious are the same process. To be conscious means we are aware of all that surrounds us, that we are taking in through our senses all that we can, but we may or may not process, or interpret, this information. Indeed, it is usually much too much to take in, and we filter out, repress, deny, have blind spots. So many ways to not be

aware! One would think that awareness was exhausting the way we have so many methods not to be aware. But you want to question everything taught to you because you realize the categories fall short of what you need to be aware. Everything you learned, everything we learned, does not help us know each other any better. We need a new language or maybe we need a new aesthetic: A new consciousness toward each other. What might our questions sound like then?

Vocabulary of continuums

You ask, “Are you a woman?” I say, “I am female but I am not a woman, not exactly because I do not fit that gender role.” You say, “I am a woman. I fit the gender role but have wanted to jump out into something else. And there are people who are women who make me not want to be a woman.” Here the new conversation seems to begin because I, too, have wanted to shed the tight fitting gender roles. Not to abandon them but to reconstruct, recreate, what might be possible from within if we could be more than what we think we should be. If we could be more than what we are expected to be. Categories are like ladders, like scaffolding, they help us build ourselves. Construct identities. Leslie Feinberg (1998), in *Transliberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*, writes this by way of grappling with our old question of roles, that is, gender roles:)

CHANGE IS HERE TO STAY

Elsie Torres came to Aurora in 1964 when her husband, psychologist **Aurelio Torres**, accepted a teaching position at Wells. They met while studying at the University of Havana in Cuba where they both earned doctoral degrees.

In 1965, Elsie began working as a cataloging librarian in the Wells library; however, her contributions go far beyond books and computers. She has helped make the college a multi-cultural community. Her accomplishments are reflected in the fact that she has received the student life award twice.

Elsie has been an adviser, unofficially and officially, with student organizations at the college created to give women of color a voice since they first began in the 1970s.

While she has seen much positive change in the status of minority women at Wells, she notes one constant: “What hasn’t changed is the persistence and resilience of these women in the pursuit of acceptance of diversity. Change is here, and it is here to stay.”



I am a human being who unnerves some people. As they look at me, they see a kaleidoscope of characteristics they associate with both males and females. I appear to be a tangled knot of gender contradictions. So they feverishly press the question on me: woman or man? Those are the only two words most people have as tools to shape their question. (p. 6)

“Why is it that we can’t quite know how to act with someone if we don’t know their gender, I mean, if I don’t know if it is a man or a woman? Why is that so important to know?” This is what you ask now after reading Feinberg but still there is no neat answer and new questions have not yet been formed. We need terms to guide us, to show us who we are. But remember how you didn’t care what she was or he was when you were close friends and loved playing together? Some call that childhood innocence but really it’s ignorance of adult bigotry.

“But finally where do we stand?” you ask. There must be a place where all the constants hold still and we are able to be just human. “Whatever that means,” you add. How far can we talk into the night to get to that still place? How much time does it take to get to that authentic core of what is really you? And how long would it take to unlearn gender? When can you honestly say, “This is me. This is who I am. This is not some social construction.”

Jorie Graham (1983), in her book *Erosion*, takes this up in her poem, “The Age of Reason,” when she writes:

How far is true
enough?
How far into the
earth
can vision go and
still be

love? Isn’t the
honesty
of things where they
resist,
where only the wind
can bend them
back, the real weather,
not our
desire hissing Tell me
your parts
that I may understand
your body,

your story. (p. 19)

The truth is I’m no mystery. I’m a female who is more masculine than those prominently portrayed in mass culture. Millions of females and millions of males in this country do not fit the cramped compartments of gender that we have been taught are “natural” and “normal.” – Leslie Feinberg

So, then, the places where we are truest are those places where we resist what is given us or put upon us; where we resist the truth of others. Even in our quest to love there are limits to what we can know about the other. You wonder then, “If love has its limits how shallow are the limits of hate?” It seems absurd, doesn’t it, to hate because one is unnerved by someone or because one can’t bend someone to become “normal?”

Leslie Feinberg (1993) in the autobiographically based novel, *Stone Butch Blues*, explores this:

I didn’t want to be different. I longed to be everything grown-ups wanted, so they would love me. I followed all their rules, tried my best to please. But there was something about me that made them knit their eyebrows and frown. No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That’s what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through this constant refrain: “Is that a boy or a girl?” (p. 13)

Five years later, Feinberg (1998) brings this experience into theoretical focus in *Transliberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* and begins to articulate a shift from dichotomous language to a vocabulary of continuums. The word transgender sounds right:

The truth is I’m no mystery. I’m a female who is more masculine than those prominently portrayed in mass culture. Millions of females and millions of males in this country do not fit the cramped compartments of gender that we have been taught are “natural” and “normal.” For many of us, the words *woman* and *man*, *ma’am* or *sir*, *she* or *he* — in and of themselves — do not total up the sum of our identities or of our oppressions. Speaking for myself,

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my life only comes into focus when the word *transgender* is added to the equation.

Simply answering whether I was born female or male will not solve the conundrum. Before I can even begin to respond to the question of my own birth sex, I feel it's important to challenge the assumption that the answer is always as simple as either-or. I believe we need to take a critical look at that assumption that is built into the seemingly innocent question: "What a beautiful baby — is it a boy or a girl?" (p. 7)

A new language of inquiry

Perhaps the old questions of gender can give way to a new language of inquiry about each other. We can ask each other different questions at work, in class, over lunch, at night when no one else is around, anytime. We can ask different questions.

I haven't stayed within the lines of gender. I was, as a child, what people call a tomboy although I never heard this word growing up. Short haired and often dressed in a dirty white undershirt, climbing trees, playing hooky from school, riding a mini-bike in the woods or racing it against the Martins on the road, or bringing a mouse to school in a shoe box — none of this had a label. For me, it was just fun. And none of it ever caused me any worry in childhood or puberty. I suppose I thought it was normal to change my name to Peter or something when I ordered boy's sneakers from Sears and I needed to provide a name and my address. I don't know why I even thought to take on a boy's name at 9 or 11 years of age. I would ride my bicycle to the post office and pick up the mail almost every day. On the days I got something it was thrilling and when I got my new sneakers I couldn't stop looking down at my feet.

I haven't stayed within the lines of sexuality either. But it wasn't until adolescence when my gender identity connected with my sexual identity (a large part of this identity is my sexual orientation) that I began to feel queer. Now, I mean queer in all the ways that it's meant; strange, freakish, unusual, and homosexual. I didn't fit the dominant model for the development of gender and sexuality in adolescence; a feminine heterosexual woman or a masculine heterosexual man. I knew — like any adolescent who wants to fit in — that heterosexuality was the assumed norm and people who are bisexual, homosexual, asexual, or monosexual are marginalized, laughed at, and hated. I was about 15 when it became clear to me that I was a lesbian and that scared me a lot. To know you will be hated is terrifying. But to be loved is worth that.


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If one is both a gender and sexual deviant, adolescence is not likely to be fun at the prom and one will likely not look forward to dating or making out in the backseat or front seat or anywhere for that matter because the risks of violence are high. The rate of suicide for queer youth is triple the rate for heterosexual youth. Although this statistic is debated all can agree that there is something to worry about. Obviously, I am still around to write this but what I learned to be able to survive is knowledge I cherish. One of the things I've learned is that we have to ask each other about our lives, share notes, stories, compare, so that we can get to new conversations about our experiences and new understandings of what and who we are.

And what would different questions about sexuality sound like? What would you ask besides, "Are you gay?" And if I answer, "Yes, I'm a lesbian" does that mean you know me? "Oh, well, that settles it then, you are queer, that's why you do what you do. That's why you look the way you do." Really? All the stereotypes tumble out; promiscuous, immoral, family values corrupted, man-hater. You see me through this primary lens which focuses singularly on my sexuality; as you see it though, not as I live it. "Could you see me differently? Ask me about love and what that feels like."

Different questions bring us to different places. Barbara McClintock knew this. Adrienne Rich knows this. Jorie Graham poses them. Leslie Feinberg lives them. "What are you questioning now?" I want to know. In "A Long Conversation," Rich stakes out her vision of salvage, a vision that might bring us to a different place:

I can imagine a sentence that might someday end with the word, love. Like the one written by that asthmatic young man, which begins, *At the risk of appearing ridiculous...* It would have to contain losses, resiliencies, histories faced; it would have to contain a face — his yours hers mine — by which I could do well, embracing it like water in my hands, because by then we could be sure that "doing well" by one, or some, was immiserating nobody. A true sentence, then, for greeting the newborn. (— Somewhere else. In our hopes.) (p. 64)

And I want to ask, can we imagine that? Will we hope for that? *A sentence that might someday end with the word, love.* The newborn, not just a boy or a girl, all possibilities, full human rights, potential to be fulfilled, becoming aware that our questions are still unformed, unlearning what we thought was true. *Risking appearing ridiculous.* 

CONSTRUCTING TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES

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"Diversity's New Quest(ions)" is an introductory piece that begins to establish a conceptual framework for the research she will conduct during her sabbatical leave next year. This project will focus on the interactions between gender and sexual orientation during adolescence and how these interactions shape transgender identities.

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