

**Northeastern University Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Annual Women's History Month Symposium
March 25, 2022
Cabral Center, Northeastern University**

**Feminism for the Future:
Constructive Conversations on Lesbian & Trans
Identities & Politics**

In recent years, the conflicts between trans and (some) lesbian activists have become increasingly polarized and tense. While this has been less pronounced in the US than in Britain, where a version of trans-exclusive radical feminism is quite visible and vocal, tensions can still run high here in the US. Too often this debate is both historically ill-informed and reduced to ad hominin Twitter attacks and name-calling. This Symposium seeks to provoke meaningful dialogue on the relationship among feminism, trans scholarship and activism, and lesbian politics and theory. Starting from the position that trans inclusion and liberation is non-negotiable, this symposium aims to unpack and analyze the fears and falsehoods that motivate lesbian attacks on trans activists. We want to initiate a dialogue that is respectful, deeply informed by evidence, historically accurate, and aligned with building a multi-racial, gender-inclusive, intersectional feminism that erases neither “lesbian” nor “trans.” Key questions that will animate our discussion include:

- What is the origin of current fears of so-called “lesbian erasure” and is that a red (lavender?) herring?
- What theoretical frameworks undergird transphobic ideologies?
- Is gender imagined differently by trans scholars than by lesbian scholars?
- Is there a relationship between the decline of a specifically lesbian culture (e.g. the closure of most lesbian bars and bookstores) and the rise of trans activism?
- How have lesbian and trans identities shifted across history and geography?
- What is the complex psychic relationship between identity and desire?
- What will it take to create a more productive dialogue?
- How can we create feminist communities that are inclusive *and* open to debate and contestation?

Schedule for the Day

Check-in & Breakfast

8:30 – 9:30 am

Cabral Center Lobby (check-in) & Conference Room (Breakfast)

Welcome Remarks

9:30 – 9:40 am

Cabral Center

Suzanna Walters, Northeastern University, Director, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; Professor, WGSS & Sociology; Editor-in-Chief, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society

Break

9:30 – 9:40 am

Desiring Identity: The Politics of Gender and the Gender of Politics

9:45 – 11:30 am

Moderator: Libby Adler, Northeastern University, Professor of Law and WGSS

Theories of gender and gender identity have been crucial to feminist, lesbian, and trans politics. Yet the term “gender” has now been increasingly weaponized by both right-wing activists eager to undo decades of progress in feminist, queer, and trans rights and transphobic activists who mobilize under the banner of “gender-critical” feminism. Gender, then, is used as a cudgel in a variety of crucial political sites – from reproductive rights to queer and trans citizenship and belonging. What is the relationship between desire, identity, and the politics of gender in our current historical moment?

Brenda Cossman, University of Toronto

“The New Sex Wars: The Terf War Version”

My paper will explore the contemporary feminist contestations over trans women in the context of the ongoing sex wars. In my recent work, I have explored how contemporary debates over the legal regulation of sex harm replay the same divisions that have plagued feminism since the sex wars on the 1970s and 1980s. Feminists remain divided along the same axes of sexuality, agency and the role of law. In this paper, I turn the sex war lens to contemporary debates over trans identities and feminist politics, arguing that they are in many respects the same as those of the sex wars, when radical feminists similarly sought to exclude trans women from feminist community and politics. While conceptions of gender have shifted over time, some of the underlying imaginaries and antagonisms remain fundamentally unchanged. While I have argued for a reparative approach to the divisions of the sex wars in relation to the regulation of sexual harm, reading the sides beside rather than against each other, I remain more skeptical about its utility in producing a more respectful and productive dialogue in the context of the trans debates, where the very legitimacy of identity and belonging is at stake. Bracketing my skepticism, my paper will ruminate how a better understanding of the intellectual history of feminist divides may help us produce the current ones.

Mairead Sullivan, Loyola Marymount University

“Gender and the Question of Lesbian Extinction. Or, when is lesbian more like a weapon?”

I frame this talk as a love letter to the multi-gendered political promises of lesbian feminism. Surveying nearly fifty years of lesbian as a political identity, I trace the suturing of “lesbian” to both projects of gender liberation and to projects of gender conservation. From the Lavender Menace to Lesbian Chic to “Get the L out,” I argue that lesbian’s political promise, a politics rooted in engagement, critique, and destruction of the gender system, is the connective tissue between those who worry over lesbian’s demise and those who refuse lesbian’s identitarian impulses. In so doing, I consider how lesbian has been weaponized to sever this connective tissue. Returning to questions of gender in the histories of lesbian politics, I argue, can resist this severance.

V Varun Chaudhry, Brandeis University

“Backlash: Defining and Mobilizing ‘Transphobia’”

This paper will take a grassroots trans-focused funding initiative from which to define and expand the discursive and material contours of “transphobia.” Drawing on grant applications from the last ten years of the Trans Justice Funding Project, which funds grassroots, trans-led organizing across the United States, this paper thinks through the symbolic and material work of transphobia in the realm of transgender funding and organizing. If combating transphobia is the animating desire for not only transgender organizing, but also transgender studies (and any gender studies projects committed to trans communities), then it is crucial to define its parameters both discursively and materially. Attending to the communities who may be defined outside of or in opposition to the category “transgender” – specifically, Black lesbian and masculine of center individuals who may or may not identify themselves as transgender – opens up space for us to mine transphobia for its polymorphous possibilities to do (un)gender justice.

Break

11:30 – 11:45 am

Identifying Desire: Feeling Lesbian, Feeling Trans, Feeling Feminist

11:45 am – 1:30 pm

Moderator, K.J. Rawson, Northeastern University, Professor of English & WGSS

Desire and identity are two of the most weighted words in feminist and queer theory and politics. Our panelists will engage with questions of affect and anxiety that underlie both identity formation and the construction of ourselves as desiring subjects. What does it mean to “feel” lesbian, trans, and feminist and why are these feelings so often pitted in opposition to each other? How does language and terminology help or hinder the desire for more constructive conversations?

Cameron Awkward-Rich, University of Massachusetts Amherst

“Against Resolution”

Part complaint, part Clare Hemming’s style exercise in feminist storytelling, this talk is interested in the bad feelings—disappointment, betrayal, wariness—that attend the ongoing institutionalization of trans studies within WGSS departments. But rather than seeking the resolution of these fields, these feelings, I return to Audre Lorde’s famous letter to Mary Daly as a model of (and impetus for) bearing intramural irresolution.

Tey Meadow, Columbia University

“Disappointing Others”

Feeling like something, anything, means situating ourselves in a discursive economy that exceeds our control. This seems ironic in the case of so-called “queer” modalities of being, since the very thing they attempt is a contestation of that limiting economy. No wonder we spend so much time trying to control both ideas of who and what we are, and also who else gets to be that very same thing. This is terrain ripe for both expectation and disappointment. Reading some foundational queer theory the way others might read self-help, I’ll offer some remarks on what it means to feel lesbian, to feel trans, to feel feminist, to feel middle-aged college professor, and at base, so frequently and inescapably, to feel disappointed.

Emily Owens, Brown University

“Culture, or, How do we belong to one another”

My comments begin with culture--the truisms, the jokes, the styles, the feelings--that designate forms of belonging in black(ish) queer-feminist community. I am deliberately forwarding this cumbersome and imprecise stand-in term because to elaborate ways of being in community that embrace and value identity while also not focusing on particularization, stability of categories, and taxonomies. If in academic spaces we tend toward the particular, in community spaces we tend toward a language of mutual-knowing without explanation and mutual-desire, in which idioms like "in the family," "in community," and "we recruit" are adequate and even celebratory ways of claiming the simultaneity of mutual belonging *and* difference. Our communities are flexible, dynamic, and *weird* perhaps mostly because intimacy is flexible, dynamic, and weird.

I am interested in what it means to center culture as a point of entry into conversations about *who we are*, before but not in place of naming. Ultimately, I am interested in the forms and practices of belonging that neither ignore nor center sexual and gender designations and categories, but that proliferate along lines of foodways, domestic spaces, origin stories and historical referents, and practices and habits that make us recognizable to one another. I am interested in the specific, knowable, recognizable *but not limited or necessarily shared* ways that folks who might in public spaces designate ourselves as "feminist, lesbian, and trans" relate to one another in intimate, in-group spaces.

Lunch Break

1:30 – 3:00 pm

Cabral Center Conference Room (Grab & Go)

Dialogue: Identity, Desire, and Feminist Community

3:00 – 4:45 pm

Moderator: Suzanna Walters, Northeastern University, Professor & Director, WGSS

In this dialogue, we invite a robust discussion on the potential for building feminist community across boundaries: gender, sexual, geographical. Our two discussants bring with them long and deep histories with feminist, queer, lesbian, and trans activism and scholarship from the UK and the US. Why does this moment seem so particularly fraught around issues of gender and sexual identity? How do we push back against anti-trans, anti-lesbian, and anti-feminist politics? How can we construct feminist communities that provide a safe home for multiple identities and desiring subjects?

Discussants: Finn Mackay, University of the West of England

Susan Stryker, Mills College

Panelist Bios

Cameron Awkward-Rich is the author of two collections of poetry—*Sympathetic Little Monster* (Ricochet Editions, 2016) and *Dispatch* (Persea Books, 2019)—as well as *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment*, forthcoming from Duke University Press. His writing has appeared, in various forms, in *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Signs*, and elsewhere, and has been supported by fellowships from Cave Canem, the Lannan Foundation, and the ACLS. Presently, he is an assistant professor in Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

V Varun Chaudhry is an Assistant Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Brandeis University, and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Applied Trans Studies. V's research explores transgender and gender nonconforming-focused advocacy in nonprofit and funding agencies in the United States. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Feminist Theory*, *American Anthropologist*, and *The Foundation Review*. They are also the author of *Transforming Inclusion: An Organizational Guide*, published by the Leeway Foundation in 2018, *Out in Research: A Guide to LGBTQ Market Research*, published in partnership with Suzy, Inc. in 2021, and *Funding Trans Resilience*, published with the Gender Justice Fund in 2022.

Brenda Cossman is Professor of Law at the University of Toronto. She was Director of U of T's [Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies](#) from 2009-2018. She holds degrees in law from Harvard and the University of Toronto and an undergraduate degree from Queen's. Prior to joining the University of Toronto, she was Associate Professor at Osgoode Hall Law School of York University. In 2012, Professor Cossman was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. In 2009, she was awarded the Mundell Medal for contributions to letters and law. Professor Cossman's teaching and scholarly interests include family law, law and gender, and law and sexuality. Her most recent book is *The New Sex Wars: Sexual Harm in the Age of #MeToo* (NYU Press, 2021). Other publications include [Sexual Citizens: The Legal and Cultural Regulation of Sex and Belonging](#) (Stanford University Press, 2007), the co-authored *Bad Attitudes on Trial: Pornography, Feminism and the Butler Decision* (University of Toronto Press) and *Censorship and the Arts* (published by the Ontario Association of Art Galleries).

Finn Mackay is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. With a professional background in youth work and policy, Finn worked for several years in a London Education Authority, designing and delivering a new domestic abuse prevention education programme across all young people's settings. Following this they undertook a PhD in the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol. Finn is the author of two books: 'Radical Feminism: Activism in Movement' and 'Female Masculinities and the Gender Wars'. Finn founded the London Feminist Network in 2004, which revived the London Reclaim the Night march and built this into an annual, national event attended by thousands and inspiring similar marches and Networks around the UK; they have been involved in feminist activism in the UK for over twenty years.

Tey Meadow is Associate Professor of Sociology at Columbia University. She is the author of *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty First Century* and the Co-editor of *Other Please Specify: Queer Methods in Sociology*. She is at work on a new book tentatively entitled *Edgeplay: The Erotic Life of Social Difference*.

Emily Owens is the David and Michelle Ebersman Assistant Professor of History at Brown University, where she researches and teaches about US slavery, the legal history of race and sexual violence, and the intellectual history of American feminisms. She also writes histories of the present that explore how structural racism and misogyny get expressed in ordinary life. Her first book, *The Fantasy of Consent: Violence and Survival in Antebellum New Orleans*, is forthcoming from UNC Press in 2022, and her writing can also be found in *Signs: Journal of Women, Culture and Society*, *The Black Scholar*, *Literary Hub* and other fora. In addition to her appointment in History, Owens also acts as a faculty fellow at Brown's Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice.

Susan Stryker is Professor Emerita of Gender and Women's Studies. Since retiring from UofA, she has been Presidential Fellow and Visiting Professor of Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University (2019-2020) and Barbara Lee Distinguished Chair in Women's Leadership, Mills College (2020-2022). She continues to serve as executive editor of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, and as co-editor of the Duke University Press book series *ASTERISK: gender, trans-, and all that comes after*. She is the author of *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (2008, 2017), co-editor of the two-volume *Transgender Studies Reader* (2006, 2013) and *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix* (2022), as well as co-director of the Emmy-winning documentary film *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (2005). She is currently working to complete her book manuscript, *Changing Gender: A Trans History of North America from Colonization to the Present* (under contract to Farrar Straus Giroux), and developing a variety of film and television projects.

Mairead Sullivan is Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, CA. Sullivan is the author of *Lesbian Death: Desire and Danger Between Feminist and Queer* (University of Minnesota Press, Fall 2022). Sullivan's work has appeared in *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, and *differences*.