

A Feminist Look at the Kaleidoscope of Identity

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Early in my career, concurrent with my growing awareness of the psychological impact of race, culture, and ethnicity, I encountered the feminist movement and found its basic tenets consonant with my own life experience. In psychology, feminist ideas were coming to the foreground in research aiming to demonstrate that women were not inferior to men or that different from them in skills and capabilities. A defining moment in my professional development occurred for me at a conference in the late 1970s where women of color talked about racial loyalties being in opposition to women's issues. I remember feeling puzzled and conflicted: weren't we women? Why see race and gender oppression as oppositional issues? Both were of equal interest to us, I thought. The attitude of these women, of course, partly manifested gender power hierarchies in action: a man's career was always more important than a woman's. And, in the racial power hierarchy, "women" meant "white women". Women of color felt as if they had to choose for or against the interests of others, never for themselves.

Time and again, I have felt that my ethnic identity was given precedence over other "parts" of me. If I identified as woman or a feminist, I was openly challenged as a "traitor" to my Latino/Hispanic roots. Something similar was true for my therapy clients and students. Because the majority of my clients were women of color and/or immigrant women from different parts of the world, grasping what was most important to each one

of them was not an easy task. Yes, their ethnicity was an important factor shaping their life experience. Yet they lived that ethno-racial experience as women. Yes, some issues took precedence at one point in their lives, or under specific circumstances, but every factor constituting their identity was present all the time, modulating the whole and creating a unique personal experience.

The fact is that we all live as embodied sexualized and racialized beings. At the simplest level, no one can be a man or woman, *except* as member of some racial group or groups. No one can be a member of a racial or cultural group, *except* as a man or a woman. Femaleness and maleness are not intelligible in isolation from a given race, ethnicity, religious perspectives and other socio-cultural contexts. The boundaries of sex are also boundaries of race and vice versa. These distinct categories are always lived as interconnected by any given individual. Perhaps, as Judith Butler and others propose, there are more than two genders. And, as we know, racial categories may be predicated falsely on dichotomies claimed to be biological. Yet –even though these dichotomies are more social categories than specific ontological realities– their profound societal and personal consequences, form the context of every day life processes of oppression and privilege, and the lens through which we learn to make human bodies intelligible.

Indeed, racial stereotypes have been presented as differences in sexual behavior. Appetites and aversions, desires and disgust in sexual and gendered behaviors have been interpreted as the differences between “us” and “them.” Discussions about brain differences between Blacks and Whites, parallel discussions about differences in the brains of women and men or people of different sexual-affectational orientations. Regardless of what those differences might be, the operating force is the social

interpretations of what the differences *should* mean for the construction of everyday life. And educational systems, political institutions, and religious teachings produce power differentials internalized by individuals, who, in turn, maintain the illusion that these are “essential” differences that cannot be changed because they are determined by biology or by divine will.

Perhaps the simplest illustration about the construction and interweaving of categories is the importance placed by immigration legislation and enforcing authorities on issues of women’s sexuality such as prostitution, lesbianism and pregnancy– all of which have been used to exclude female immigrants at one point or another. Immigration legislation and enforcement have been major sites for the construction and regulation of women’s sexual identities because through the control of immigrant women’s sexuality, prevalent “moral” perspectives on all women in the U.S. have been postulated. There is a well-developed scholarship about how official immigration policies aim to construct and reproduce racial, ethnic, and class distinctions. However, there is minimal work on the role of U.S. immigration policies in the creation of sexuality and gender norms.

Despite the interweaving of these categories and the personal and political consequences they entail, psychologists too have placed most of the emphasis in their effort to incorporate cultural issues into their research and practice on racial/ethnic differences.

My clients and I felt fragmented, as if we were being forced to choose only one piece of ourselves to focus on because that was the piece others needed from us. Sometimes, those who mattered most to us saw our desire to address all aspects of who we were as rejection or denial of the social condition we shared with them.

Slowly, I began to realize that my clients and I lived with an internal kaleidoscope: the internal colored glass fragments rearranged themselves to produce different pictures at different moments... but they were there all the time. I've come to believe that everyone's truth, including my own, lies in that internal kaleidoscope. The beauty of the kaleidoscope images is produced through the juxtaposition and reworking of parts in relation to one another, not to the fragmentation per se.

Let me clarify: I believe that a sense of integrated selfhood is needed for a healthy life and do not glorify the beauty of fragmentation as some post-modernists might. Through the years I have come to believe that available narratives –and the language to name the experiences that accompany these narratives– serve as an integrative force that produces an “identity core.” I understand human subjective experience as a story that provides a sense of unity to these diverse and sometimes contradictory identity claims. It is through the subjective organization of time, experience and language that we come to understand who we are. How we subjectively organize our lives into a story gives us a sense of unity despite the contradictions. All therapeutic approaches from Psychoanalysis to CBT, reframe and re-create the client's story. An essential part of this story-making is to see the manifestations of multiple identities not as a person's “resistance” to accept who they are or as “political disloyalties” toward a particular oppressed community but as the complex expression of who this person really is. Indeed, every person is a complex entity.

The narrative constructed in life or in therapy constitutes an active system that provides significance and gives sense to experience. Both healthy and pathological reactions have their source in the content of our own self-narrative. While narratives and

life stories play an essential role in the formation of individual identity, cultural conditions and social systems of power both constrain and facilitate the development of these narratives. One's critical insight and engagement also affect how one can transform one's personal stories and narratives. Stories lived, and stories told, are influenced by what is culturally acceptable. Social systems of power regulate not only acceptable behavior but also acceptable accounts of behavior. When social transformations occur or when the person moves to a different cultural context, acceptable accounts can undergo transformation. Change in the life story does not occur only in one direction. The stories we create can have constricting or liberatory and transformative consequences for the development of identities and possible lives. Therapy is one of the tools we have to create our story. But so are education, conversation, and other forms of human interaction.

While I was struggling to understand my clients' complexity at a professional level –without much help from existing theories– I was also struggling with my own identity and my own understanding of who I was in this U.S. society. Here I was an immigrant: the ways in which I was seen and I saw myself were sometimes in active opposition to each other. My life has been marked by the experience of migration. I possess the vague certainty that I could have been another person if I had never left my country. Yet, the only me I know is the one that incorporates the consequences of migration. However, I do not fit most people's stereotypes of what immigrant women look like. Initially, being “a woman of color” was a strange concept for me as an immigrant. To express confusion about how to place myself into this U.S.-specific categorization was perceived by many of my friends as an attempt to use the color of my skin to “pass” and separate myself from others. Slowly, I started to understand that there

was a deeper meaning to the term, which had to do with my position in a social context that was now different from whatever I had known before. My internal universe started shifting, I started “feeling” and “seeing” myself as a woman of color once I understood my new social space and realized that, in this case, physiognomy did not have much to do with my place in the social hierarchy of oppressions in the U.S.

A closely connected issue for all immigrants is learning to live in another language, because language is also implicated in social hierarchies of power and oppression. Every language is linked to a culture’s philosophy of life. Language determines knowledge of the world, of others, and of oneself. Language loss and its concomitant sense of identity loss and transformation are one of the most powerful components of the immigrant experience. An immigrant’s refusal to learn the new language might be an expression of the desire for self-preservation. Yes, learning a new language provides the immigrant with the opportunity to function in society and even “create a new self.” But beyond allowing immigrants to function in the new context, a new language has profound impact on their sense of self and identity. Learning to “live” in a new language is not merely an instrumental process. It is not a neutral act. It implies becoming immersed in the power relations of the specific culture that speaks the specific language. Paradoxically, becoming more proficient in the language of the host society implies learning one’s place in the structures of social inequality. Speech is a class signifier, a signifier of your right to belong or a measure of your status as an outsider. To speak with a foreign accent places one in a less privileged position within social power relations. I have lived

most of my adult life immersed in another language and I have never completely lost the self-consciousness of an accent that I hear but cannot control.

(There is much more I could say about language that could take us away from the central points of this discussion. But let me reiterate here that I believe the issue of language is enormously significant in therapy with multilingual people, even those who are completely fluent in English. Therapy is mostly about speaking: a “talking cure.” The language of that conversation is either a tool or an impediment to the “cure.” It can facilitate working through early intrapsychic conflicts, and finding new ways of self-expression that may not have been available in the world of the first language. Or it can operate as a barrier or a tool of resistance, denying access to emotions and experiences that may not be accessible in another language).

After countless initial confusions with categories of belonging, I felt deeply identified with Hispanic/Latinos and understood the dynamics of being a person of color in the U.S. But my Cuban heritage continues to be a bone of contention both among Cuban friends and relatives and among friends and colleagues from other communities of color. On the one hand, I can and do understand the pain and anger of Cuban exiles and the political conservatism these provoke even though I don't share these political views. However, according to some Cubans, I am at the edge, if not already inside, the Communist Party because of my outspoken commitment to social justice issues. Conversely, most people who know I am Cuban-born immediately draw conclusions about my social class background, political beliefs and voting behavior. They quickly assume I am a conservative Republican upper-class white Cuban and respond to me as such.

Well, let me tell you a story. It may come as a surprise to know that I lived my childhood in poverty; no less harsh because it was hidden beneath the trappings of the middle-class life that my parents had known in their youth and wanted to believe they still enjoyed. My father had been a Navy lawyer in Cuba in the 1930s. He had obtained his position after years of study and days of written examinations. He had married my mother and had two children, thinking himself securely employed. Then, in December 1941, Fulgencio Batista –who had been elected president for the first time the previous year after several attempts at seizing power— “reorganized” the Cuban Armed Forces. My father was completely unprepared when Batista fired him together with all other officers across all branches of the military known to be unsympathetic to his government. My father was left without a job and with a young wife and two daughters to feed. He had a teaching credential, and with more hope than understanding, conceived the idea of starting his own elementary school and commercial academy. Barely six months after Batista’s action, we moved to a flat above a house-painting store in a commercial district in Havana. There my father started his school and I found myself, transplanted into a cramped space at the back of his small school, in the middle of the traffic bustle of Havana.

The rest of my childhood took place in this small space. My two brothers were born there. There, my sister and I had our first periods. And there I built a world of fantasy in my head to compensate for the dreary and limiting surroundings in which I felt imprisoned. I spent my childhood surrounded by desks and blackboards, eating lunch and dinner quickly because the dining room had to be turned into a classroom for the

afternoon and evening classes. For hours I remained as quiet as possible behind forbidden doors so that my father's classes were not disrupted by any sense of our presence.

The school failed miserably. There was barely enough money for food. Our daily diet was rice and beans, “*arroz con algo*” or tasteless spaghetti. I hated this food and ate very little. Rejecting food became a way of life. I was so thin my mother called me “*lagartijita*” – “little lizard.” I weighed under 100 lbs. until I was over 30. Through childhood and adolescence, I wore clothes discarded by relatives or family friends who had outgrown them. And so, I learned to dress “like a million dollars” spending very little. Only spirituality, fantasy, and the desire to learn kept me going during most of childhood and adolescence. It was in my father’s school, on top of desks and next to big blackboards that I played at being Joan of Arc during vacations and on weekends when all the students were gone. My fantasy life saved me. Through it, I constructed possible worlds some of which I have now realized.

I did not go to my father's school. My parents wanted to preserve for my siblings and me the middle-class opportunities they had expected us to have, but which arbitrary political events interrupted beyond their control. So, using his Church friendships and connections, my father got scholarships for my three siblings and me at private religious schools for middle-class girls and boys. I learned to lead a double life. By day, I lived among girls who, at four o'clock, returned to homes with the porches, patios, gardens and garages like I pretended to have even though I retreated to the two rooms in the back of my father’s school to do my homework and read and fantasize in silence. I made sure none of my classmates knew how I lived.

I hope you have noticed that my social class experience has been muddled and confused. The experience of childhood poverty marked me forever. Keeping the secret of that poverty was a constant source of pain during childhood and adolescence. Yet it was a lesson that has served me well as a therapist and keeper of others' secrets.

As significant as these childhood experiences that shaped my life, my sexual-affectual orientation has been equally important and also a source of professional involvement. Most people who look at me assume that I am a heterosexual woman with several children and even a few some grandchildren. After all, isn't that the typical Latina? Imagine their surprise to discover that I have no children, no grandchildren, and, above all, no husband! (At least not after a very brief marriage more than 30 years ago...).

Coming out as a lesbian before 1973 created anxieties about my professional life: How could I be a good psychologist if I was "sick"? Never mind that I didn't feel sick at all but in fact I felt more alive and complete than ever before. Luckily, in a few years not only the sick label disappeared but a new Division at the APA emerged to focus on the study of gay and lesbian issues. I found many colleagues who shared my identity and professional interest in sexual-affectual orientation.

Still, among Latinos, my sexuality was a thorny issue. I was told once at a meeting of Latinas in the 1980s that "lesbianism is an illness we catch from American women." And, of course, we know that there are no lesbians or gay men among immigrants. Some people just get to be "like that" as a result of the negative influence of acculturation into American society...

Because I have lived most of my adult life as a lesbian, many people conclude that I have no use for religion since most religious institutions condemn my “life style.” However, nothing matters more to me than my relationship with God. Yet I refuse to let religious institutions and authorities determine how I should or will live. Religion is not only rules and holy books. It is about our innermost being, our expectations, hopes, and desires for transcendence. Spiritual beliefs have provided forms of expression and understanding for people who were otherwise excluded from the mainstream. Latin American Liberation Theology, the Black Church in the U.S., and medieval European women mystics have a lot in common, regardless of the differences in centuries, geography, and social context. For me, as for many other people, a relationship with the divine— whatever that is and however it is interpreted— is a source of life and freedom, not a constricting force that stifles inner being. I have come to believe that killing the sexual drive in oneself or— alternatively— the appetite for God is a form of surrendering to and bolstering the power of patriarchal oppressive forces.

I have observed in myself and others that far from being destructive, spirituality and religious beliefs can enhance psychological well-being as well as health in general. It is not belief in God (or whatever name we have for whatever that might be) that damages people psychologically or creates useless destructive guilt. The damage comes from "half-baked" and limited religious education filtered by sexist/racist/heterosexist authority figures. Just as we educate our clients and students so they understand they are not guilty for having been abused or raped, we could help them see that it is not God, or the sense of the sacred and divine, who is punishing or persecuting them but rather some

of the self-declared agents of God who transmit their own sexism, heterosexism, and/or racism *as if* it was God's word.

I know that religion has been –and continues to be– used as a force to keep people “in their place” and away from self-realization. Yes, religions can be oppressive. But so can psychology. Let me remind you that, as feminist multicultural psychologists, we do not let the sexism, racism or heterosexism of Freud, Jung or Stanley Hall or some other leader in psychology define what psychology is or should be. In fact, creating a new psychology with and for people in oppressed groups *is* our lives’ work. By the same token, we should not let Popes, priests, ministers or rabbis tell us who God really is. We would not accept, for example, that women should not go to therapy because Freud was a sexist and we should not accept that women should not be religious because the Pope or any other male religious leader is a sexist.

As if I did not have enough little pieces of glass in my internal kaleidoscope, I am now in the process of incorporating two more, recently acquired identities to my “collection.” These two negative social identities I have not fully embraced yet. I have not learned to make them part of my internal kaleidoscope.

The first one is my recent awareness/consciousness that I have joined the – inevitable– ranks of “the elderly.” It may seem obvious to you that this is the case but I have to confess that the idea of being an “old woman” is not fully part of how I see myself. Even being inducted as an elder of the multicultural community last year did not make me fully conscious of this reality. I read something recently about “an old woman of 65” and I bristled... “What do you mean old? She’s *only* 65!” But late December, when

I turned 67, I suddenly thought, “Oh my God, I am three years away from 70! That must mean I am old!”

The second new piece in my identity kaleidoscope has to do with an injury to my left knee I suffered in Thailand in January 2005. Even after surgery, I have not fully recovered. It has been quite a shock to my self-image to realize that I can no longer run up and down stairs and corridors at full speed as I have always done. The nickname my high school students in Costa Rica had for me was “the Roadrunner.” But probably there will never be anymore running or walking for 2 or 3 hours at a time. The “Roadrunner” now goes down airport hallways in a wheelchair. Not to mention that, most probably, I will continue to be in constant pain... mild, but constant nonetheless. It is a shock to see myself as old and disabled. It is also a reality I will have to learn with and take into consideration when I plan and undertake activities.

I have used illustrations from my own life to explore the fundamental question that concerns me today: how should we deal with apparent conflicts or contradictions in identity? First, we must ask, are they truly “contradictions” for the person? You may be surprised to learn the major conflict I experience stems from the position of those around me who want me to declare my “true identity.” To put it concretely, it has been as troubling for me to deal with other people, lesbians included, who think that it is ridiculous and absurd to believe in anything spiritual –unless it is the goddess—as it has been to confront Church teachings about my sexual-affectional orientation! It has been equally difficult to negotiate between my political commitments and my Cuban heritage because both camps expect me to renounce the other. For me, as for many others, the

challenge has been how to find room for my multi-dimensional self when the dominant expectation is that I should choose only one identity and stick to it.

Let's imagine for a moment that I walk into your office as a prospective client. What do you see when you see me? If I had not spoken, if you did not know who I was, if you had passed me on a city street or if you find me at your office door or in the hallways of any educational institution, what would be your impression of who I am? If you do not hear my accent, do you "peg me down" as a white/European American? (Particularly after my dark curls have turned into limp gray hair that I cover with this fake blonde color). Indeed, my grandparents were Europeans, so it is only an accident of birth that makes me a Latin American. But what an important accident of birth this is! It has shaped the course of my life, my identity, and the course of my professional career. I would not be standing here were it not for that accident of birth because the way I think, see the world, work, and live are determined by it. Perhaps I am a puzzle. Yet, like any puzzle, if all the pieces are not fitted in, if some pieces are missing, you cannot have a complete picture of me. As in a kaleidoscope, the pictures inside it cannot exist without the fragments of colored glass that constantly intermingle and shift. Each one of my apparent "contradictions" both modifies and enhances the others and, like each of the little pieces of colored glass inside the kaleidoscope, contributes to the beauty of the whole.

For the most part, it is still very hard to speak about these issues without either offending someone or having someone take offense (which is not the same thing) or finding myself alienated from those who do not want to hear what they interpret to be my "divided loyalties." Because I exist in between so many hierarchies of oppression, different and seemingly incompatible emotional, political, and cultural communities of

belonging continue to be essential for my survival. I experience misunderstanding and rejection from those who matter most to me as doubly painful. Sadly, when we are solely preoccupied with the injustices that touch us most closely, awareness about our personal oppression may not prevent us from creating other injustices. We may become complicit in the oppression of others through our efforts to liberate ourselves. We can “otherize” those who do not fit what we consider to be the “normal” category of oppression as cruelly as the powerful “otherize” us. Many people do not have an awareness that we live in a context of normalized injustice, making it easier to ignore how effective the power of horizontal oppression can be. The pain of rejection by those who we thought could understand, intensifies the structurally caused pain. We become thoughtless agents of the forces of oppression we think we are fighting when –for example– we decide that homosexuals do not belong in our churches or do not deserve the same rights because they have “chosen” their behavior. Or when we deny the fact that sexual-affectual orientation differences are present in all ethnic/racial communities, not just among privileged Whites.

I am convinced that racism and sexism derive strength from each other. Studying immigrant women from different cultural backgrounds has shown me again and again how women are made to carry “cultural values and behaviors” at the expense of their own lives. Cultural systems of power police women’s bodies in the name of tradition. Policing women’s bodies and behaviors is an attempt to preserve the past against the constant transformation of social norms. This is not just a benign manifestation of interesting “traditions.” It can cost women their lives. By the same token, conflicts about sexual orientation become a territory where groups try to preserve gender structures

untouched and uncontested. Indeed, a lot of what we believe to be truths about color and race, like gender or sexual orientation, are culture-specific metanarratives. Such metanarratives can become tools of oppression or justification for it.

Let me give you a very concrete example from my work on immigrant women and women of color. On the one hand, as we understand the complexities and nuances of human diversity more thoroughly, we realize we can no longer speak of generic “women.” Moreover, each group contains its own diversities. Conversely and paradoxically, some efforts to enhance awareness of so-called “minority issues” by those who belong to “majority groups” may become dangerously destructive for women. Even more so because they are carried out with such good intentions. Outsiders to a given cultural group, trying to become “sensitive” to “cultural differences,” may attribute behaviors they would consider unacceptable in members of the “majority culture” to being part of “the culture” of this group. In an effort to manage the guilt generated by unacknowledged racism, we easily forget that *sexism is no more deserving of respect when it is spoken in other languages or dressed in other cultural robes*. Similarly, racism should not be tolerated in the name of advancing “women’s rights.” The balance between these two is a delicate, but absolutely necessary one.

By now I presume that we all agree that we should not force our own version of feminism or “the good life” on women from diverse cultural backgrounds. To rectify past errors, efforts have been made in psychology to theorize from multicultural and international perspectives. No self-respecting psychologist or feminist will be openly or even subtly associated with racist interpretations of women’s lives. Ironically, those same people, in an effort to demonstrate their sensitivity toward other cultures, accept without

question male definitions of cultural identities and behaviors. The guilt generated by failure to acknowledge racism or sexism can become a symptom of it. For instance, in my consultation and training activities concerning immigrant communities, professionals often tell me that wife abuse is “part of these people’s culture,” implying that it should be tolerated as a demonstration of “cultural sensitivity.” My response to these comments is always this: wife abuse is *also* part of mainstream U.S. culture and, as feminists, helping professionals or educators, we would not dream of advocating tolerance for it in mainstream U.S. culture. Even though I understand the dynamics of immigrant and ethnic minority men’s displacement of their anger onto women and children as, in part, a function of their frustration about not having their “manhood” recognized in mainstream society, acceptance of violence against women as an outlet for frustration or as a legitimate reaction to these men’s own oppression is unjustifiable and immoral. And it should *not* be cloaked in the mantle of cultural sensitivity. In fact, what is this need for recognition of their “manhood,” but another manifestation of sexism and racism?

Another example: I have been present at more than one meeting or conference where rituals celebrating diverse cultures are performed. Commonly at those rituals one hears references to spiritual forces in masculine terms. Whenever I have objected to this sexist language, I have been told that that is “their tradition” and “their culture,” therefore, to be “culturally sensitive,” we should respect their use of masculine terms. Well, consider this comparison: it has been part of my tradition and cultural background to start ceremonies saying, “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Yet, my guess is that if I had started *this* talk with those ritual words, you would have been shocked and dismayed at my lack of awareness to the sexism of those words. So,

why is it that we can be aware and sensitive to the flaws in traditional “Western” ways but feign blindness to the same issues in other cultures? Why is it O.K. to be respectful of things in other traditions that we believe damage women and want to change in our own traditions? Simply put, sexism is never justifiable in the name of cultural differences *even when it may be sponsored by women*. Indeed, the acceptance of questionable aspects of those religions and cultural traditions may be a demonstration of *lack of respect* for those cultural groups by assuming that women in these groups are less able than we are to transform their understandings and deal with sexism in their own traditions. And, obviously, those among them who do are probably just imitating or copying Western/Northern/white middle-class feminists.

Interestingly, this is the claim of most male leaders in these cultural/ethnic groups. (Who created these traditions in the first place? Who benefits most from them?). Any woman who expresses concern or opposition to male domination is labeled as a traitor, who has “sold herself” to Western influence, therefore deserving condemnation without further inquiry. The fact is that in all cultures (Western cultures included), men (and many women) will resist women’s transformations of their roles and in all cultures women (and many men) are perfectly capable of undertaking this transformative task. These male community leaders have a stake at preventing the development of a feminist consciousness among women in their communities. Sometimes, apparent “cultural sensitivity” is nothing but another variety of racism that, in fact, fosters a conservative politics locking women into the past. Some of these academic practices perpetuate the “colonial gaze” and reinforce the exclusionary practices used by men who have a vested interest in keeping “their” women outside critical sites of power over their own lives.

In other words, underlying our apparent “cultural sensitivity” is an arrogant assumption that women from “other cultures” cannot construct radical feminist theory or free themselves from patriarchal bondage on their own. Our notions of “cultural sensitivity” are frequently based on a notion of “culture” as a form of preserving otherness and difference that may involve our need to see others as “picturesque” even though it may be at their own expense.

Therefore, when trying to understand other cultures, we need to reflect about the implications of maintaining a customary system that mainly targets women. My point is that we should consider the implications of what seems to be respect for customs that mainly target and oppress women or people of diverse sexual orientations and seriously limit their right to bodily and emotional integrity. The challenge is, obviously, how we preserve sensitivity and respect for others while continuing to foster liberatory/ emancipatory ideals and principles applicable to all oppressed groups, not just to some with exclusion of others. It is not enough for me to be supported in my efforts at liberation from ethnic oppression if my realities as a woman or as a lesbian are not taken into consideration. Perhaps if we explore how we deal with those issues in our own cultures or how we address our own racism, sexism, heterosexism (and other “isms”) within our own circles in a more careful way, we would be more able to refine our understanding, manifest a more authentic cultural sensitivity, and undertake serious cross-cultural dialogue. This requires deepening awareness of the interlocking nature of oppression and the continued weight of its many subtle forms, a daunting but necessary task. It means we have to pay attention to and question the nature of power and the structures that perpetuate the exercise of

power in unjust ways. Something, I might add, most psychologists are not very good at doing in both their clinical practices and the development of theories...

So, back to my original question: How to work with people (clients, students, colleagues...) who, like me, have learned to live or are struggling to live with their internal contradictions –whatever those might be in each specific case? I think the problem in doing this comes from not having a more *complex understanding of identity as the coherent incorporation of several crucial selves*. I think we need a theoretical understanding that lets us deal with people who live at the borders of human experience. Stage theories of identity tend to focus on one issue at a time. Would it be possible to create a theory that focuses on multiple identities and perhaps not so much on stages but on the integration of internal contradictions into a synthetic, yet changeable, whole?

As I have described, my own story, both personal and professional, has been shaped by the crossing of borders –both literally and in the sense that Gloria Anzaldúa introduced for this term. Anzaldúa points out that borders are sites where different cultures, identities, classes, races, genders, and sexual orientations collide and coexist. These borders are not always been easy to cross (both literally and figuratively). Yet, the endeavor to transcend them as borders, and live with all sides of the self to become who you are continues to be a critical survival tool for individuals who experience their identity like an internal kaleidoscope. Learning to live with contradictions without shying away from them; learning to claim all you are, not just those aspects considered acceptable to those surrounding you at a particular moment in your life —these skills are essential for self-preservation and healthy development. To do otherwise is to lose yourself.

To obtain the power and the freedom so unjustly denied us and many of our student, clients, friends, colleagues, is an act of social justice and liberation. Psychology training and practice need to foster this healthy development of the whole self to fulfill the “mental health” promise. Untold strength for our common struggle for social justice in the field of psychology and in the world in which we live can come from accepting and encouraging the multiple sources of identity and energy in a person. Creating our own story at the borders of multiplicity can become a powerful source of energy. After all, the Himalayas were created and grow taller every day out of the collision at the border of Asia and the Indian subcontinent! Healing and integrating the whole self will produce an equally beautiful, awesome, enormous effect in our society and in the field of feminist psychology.

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Some inspiration for this talk came from:

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