

Fighting Sexism

By Meghan Morris

"You look like a lesbian," a guy tells me. "Thanks," I reply. It's taken me a while to receive that as a compliment, especially when I know it's not meant as such. Ever since I chopped off my hair, male friends seem to think the wittiest way to say hello is by conflating my appearance with my sexuality.

You know the stereotypes – if you're female, have short hair and don't wear makeup, you're a lesbian. If you're male, wear pink shirts and talk in a high voice, you're gay. At least those are the boxes that the mainstream would like to put us into. But the fact is gender performance and sexuality are not inextricably linked. A man can have a deep voice and no fashion sense and be attracted to other men. A woman can be timid and shave her legs and be attracted to other women.

So why is it that people use "fag" or "dyke" to classify those who act in a way atypical for their gender, even when they know nothing about that person's sexuality? What purpose does this serve? The intention may be benign; I've heard the phrase "it's just a joke" quite often. (If telling me I look like a lesbian is a joke, I'm not sure what the punch line is.)

But the consequence is that these labels keep many people from straying outside of their gender box. For fear of being labeled a lesbian, women of all sexualities feel pressure to be passive or to read *Cosmo* or to keep their hair long. For fear of being labeled gay, men of all sexualities feel pressure to work out or to watch sports enthusiastically or to be dominant in their relationships. Heterosexism helps to maintain gender roles and is therefore closely related to sexism.

But the way these labels encourage us to perform is not the only problem; what they discourage us from doing also makes them so harmful. Women who fight for gender equality tend to be labeled lesbians, regardless of their sexuality. The purpose of this label is to keep women from being outspoken advocates for themselves and their sex.

Women today hesitate even to call themselves feminists, partly due to the association between being a feminist and being a lesbian. To clarify, there should be a connection between feminism and lesbians, since lesbian rights are women's rights. The problem is that because being called a lesbian is considered derogatory, people use the term to stigmatize women who are assertive and demand equality. By playing off of heterosexism, these people help to maintain sexism.

When men identify as feminists, they too are often called gay. That assumption leads to the counterintuitive conclusion that if a man cares about women, he must not be sexually at-

tracted to them. The implicit statement is that by understanding women and associating with them as equals, a man has lowered himself, has become feminine and is therefore gay.

So, when a man is called "gay" as a slur, the insult is not just that he is gay, but that he is acting like a woman. Whether or not he is attracted to men, he has broken the ranks of standard male behavior through his actions or appearance.

This type of deviance is checked or at least ostracized. Mainstream masculinity makes it painfully clear that it does not condone a wide range of maleness.

And why not? Well, if it is possible for men to act like women and for women to act like men, then why do we have distinct roles for the two in society?

The existence of any gender bending threatens the idea that men and women are inherently different and should be treated as such. It's why people stress out when the person they just met has an androgynous name like Jordan and they can't tell if she or he is female or male.

As much as we would like to think otherwise, we still divide our world sharply into male and female. It's the natural thing to do when we've lived for twenty or so years saturated by the idea that women are like this and men are like that, and ne'er the twain shall meet.

That being said, we don't have to accept what we've been told. We can work to stop associating gender performance with sexuality. We can stop using sexual labels as insults, even in jest, to regulate the behavior of others. If we disassociate femininity in men or masculinity in women from being gay or lesbian, it will make us all freer people.

