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Turning Assumptions Upside Down

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FACULTY

Lisa Arellano reveals the dissonance of the paradox behind the contradiction

By Gerry Boyle '78



Lisa Arellano had just finished teaching her first class for the course Queer Identities and Politics when a student approached her to say, “You know, I’m from New York, and where I’m from, these issues aren’t even issues.”

In other words, if this is Queer Politics Lite, it’s not for me.

“Somehow she had mistakenly thought that we were going to talk about why homophobia is bad,” said Arellano, associate professor of American studies and women’s, gender, and sexuality

studies. “I think the class would have been about that ten years ago. So what is complicated for people in my field, for our students, is how to think simultaneously very consciously about a moment in which gender continues to matter very much but in very different ways.”

And that, Arellano said, is the point: “What we’re doing in the field is training students to be mindful of all these paradoxical conversations going

on simultaneously and giving them the capacity to participate in all of them and the wherewithal to know which one they’re in.”

Don’t look for easy answers with Arellano. In fact, the only thing guaranteed is that one question will lead to another as the current moment is dissected and deconstructed.

For example, gay marriage has been ratified by the U.S. Supreme Court and has been legalized in 37 states and the District of Columbia. And yet gay marriage remains a litmus test question for presidential candidates, and it’s anathema to many conservative voters.

So, asks Arellano, is acceptance of gay marriage real progress, or is it a



conventional conciliation that slowed advances in areas where change would have been more far-reaching? “Both of those conversations are very important, but we need to be having both of them, and they’re not the same,” she said. “If you have one without the other, if you talk about gay marriage as conservative ... you’re missing how it actually is quite radical in another framework. That’s the present moment.”

Arellano freezes that moment and zooms in on the images and societal forces that otherwise go by in an unexamined blur. Her Queer Politics class will begin its study with the 1940s, examining sexual practices and mores of the time, from premarital sex to same-sex relationships. Hint: there was much more sexual freedom than we might think.

So what of our so-called progress? “It feels funny, right?” Arellano prods. “There was a time when having a female presidential candidate would have felt like progress. Now [Hillary] Clinton may not be the most progressive candidate. The conversation about women and electoral politics was very different in 1920.”

If predictions are too often based on loosely formed assumptions, Arellano’s own scholarly research will confound expectations. Since her days at Stanford (she earned her Ph.D. there in 2004), she has been interested in what makes people turn to political and social violence. She has written and published extensively on vigilantism and lynch mobs, studying primary documents that reveal the ways people framed themselves and society rationalized their extreme actions.

Now she’s embarked on research of ideological violence—from the political left. From labor movements that turned violent to racial justice movements that culminated with the Black Panthers and others in the 1960s, political expression that many today might think was confined to right-wing militias is being subject to her scrutiny. The left, she reminds us, was about more than peaceniks.

Whether these movements are good or bad depends on the observer’s political views, she says, noting that many claims made by radical militant activists are very similar, whether labeled as coming from the right or the left.

Again, Arellano is delving into primary documents of the time to discern the motivation of the actors and the reaction of their audiences. One observation: while militant activism today may take the form of a ritual or a performance (see the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge occupation in Oregon), militant radicals of the 1970s were seen as a real threat to national order. “We were at war,” she said. “It has not always felt this calm, this tamped down.”

Tamped down is exactly what Arellano does not want her students to feel in the classroom. Instead, she wants them to see that there are not only different



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“Part of what I want people to do is know where they’re coming from, but also learn something about how they’ve been constituted in a particular way,” she said. “How is it possible that two different eighteen-year-olds at this school could be in such different places?”

It is possible, of course. But the reasons may be less apparent until the exploration, the process of careful and deliberate consideration, begins. “What makes this work great and this a great time to do this work are all these complications and paradoxes,” Arellano said. “It’s what makes it always harder.”

And that day’s conversation was a case in point, punctuated with a moment when she broke into a grin and told her interviewer, “Ha! You’ve stumped yourself with your own question.”