

# Whose Feminism IS it Anyway?

and other essays from the third wave



a collection by **emi koyama**

*Dedicated to Gloria Anzaldúa  
who had been by far my greatest influence and inspiration*



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Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?  
Confluere Publications  
PO Box 40570  
Portland Oregon 97240

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Layout & Design by Confluere Publications

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# A New Fat-Positive Feminism: Why Fat-Positive Feminism (Often) Sucks & How to Reinvent It.

May 5, 2004

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A while back, I went through my entire 'zine library to decide which 'zines and chapbooks I want to keep and which ones I should give away or recycle, since the sheer volume of other people's DIY writings I've accumulated over the years began to overwhelm me.

My goal was to consolidate three medium-size cardboard boxes full of 'zines into one big box that would only contain those select 'zines that I am actually likely to read again. In the process, I've come across quite a few 'zines addressing the topic of fat oppression and women's self-esteem written by other girls who are, like me, fat, proud, and fierce.

Even though I've never been deeply involved in the "fat-positive" feminist movements, I've been around them long enough to know how much it has impacted fat girls like me, and how zine-making is the perfect medium to confront and contradict the anti-fat, pro-diet biases in the mainstream media and the anti-fat industries that finance them. Nonetheless, after skimming through several of these 'zines, I felt empty and ended up tossing many of them in the "give away or recycle" pile.

And I know that this is the same empty feeling I get after attending just about every "fat positive" workshops and events (and I've attended many) including even the otherwise fabulous "FatGirl Speaks!" event in which I performed a spoken-word piece last year. This essay is an attempt to verbalize the shallowness or emptiness that I frequently feel within the fat-positive feminist movement, and how we can reinvent it.

The greatest turn-off for me with fat-positive workshops—and it somehow manages to take place in just about every such workshop—is hearing the comment that "fat oppression is the last remaining socially acceptable oppression" or that "if this was done to Blacks (and it's always Blacks, or else other people of color), there'd be an outrage."

Sometimes, this is the premise that workshop presenters (almost always white) speak from, and other times these comments are made by regular participants (again, almost always white). And it is extremely rare that someone would point out how wrong it is to rank severity of various oppressions, or to assume that the mainstream society is no longer tolerant of racism (or classism, or heterosexism, or any other oppressions, for that matter) before I do. Or sometimes don't.

The view that the fat oppression is the only socially tolerated oppression negates the experiences of not just Blacks, but all people who are marginalized by various intersecting and overlapping systems of oppressions, while at the same time erasing the presence of fat people who are dealing with multiple oppressions. Together, these factors function to limit the appeal and the membership of the fat-positive feminist movement almost exclusively to the fat women who are relatively privileged otherwise.

This brings us to the second problem with the "fat-positive" feminist movement: the inability of fat-positive workshops and 'zines to address multiple

layers of meanings the society attributes to fatness. Contrary to the idea that the fat oppression functions in some sort of socially accepted vacuum, the anti-fat attitudes and systems have everything to do with racial and class politics, not just the gender politics.

For example, the debate over the “welfare reform” has been intrinsically shaped by the fiscal conservatives’ manipulation of the public perception of inner-city welfare recipients as fat, Black, lazy single mothers. Exploiting such perception, they managed to convince voters that the solution to the problem of poverty is to send the poor mothers back to work, nevermind the fact that few jobs today actually pay “family” wage. In order to counter such propaganda, it is not enough to criticize the use of fatness or fat stereotype as the symbol of laziness or unworthiness; we must take apart its anti-fat, sexist, racist, and classist overtones piece by piece until lies and bigotry are exposed as such.

Third, the fat-positive feminism must pay attention to many other ways in which human bodies are socially regulated. For example, there appears to be natural opportunities for the disability movement and fat-positive movement to work together as both movements challenge the society’s definition of normal and acceptable bodies. However, this potential alliance is hindered by the fat-positive movement’s oft-repeated insistence that fat people are healthy and productive.

These notions of health and productivity both assume a certain type of body to be “normal” based on its ability to participate in the capitalist labor market as it exist today, and denies the basic human dignity to those bodies deemed too “crippled” to participate in the workforce. However, it is not our physical differences that limit the ability of people with “crippled” bodies to fully participate in the society; it is the lack of accessibility and accommodation based on the limited view of humanity that does.

Also problematic is the fat-positive movement’s disdain of people with “eating disorders,” especially toward members of the so-called “pro-ana” movement (i.e. women who celebrate extreme dieting and purging as personally gratifying and empowering). As Becky Thompson argues in her book “A Hunger So Wide And So Deep,” dieting and purging are often form of self-help, two of many creative ways women cope with life and reclaim the sense of control in a society that robs from us genuine control over circumstances of our lives. If so, we could recognize that both fat-positive feminism and pro-ana movement are basically made up of women who are refusing the society’s labeling of their bodily differences and coping methods as “unhealthy” or “maladaptive.”

In fact, similarities between the two movements are many. Both groups are primarily made up of women who are considered sick and in need of “help” to alter who they are. Women from both groups report strong sense of alienation and isolation prior to finding others with similar experiences. A common statement made toward someone who is anorexic is that “most men aren’t attracted to fat women, but neither are they attracted to extremely thin women,” as if that is all that matters in a woman’s life.

Sure, dieting and purging could be, if not careful, harmful to one’s health; but so is being fat: why do we need to judge or fight each other? Some fat-positive activists refer to those who diet and purge as “brainwashed” or as victims in need of our rescue, but how is that different from the society telling the fat women that we should lose weight for our own good? As we criticize the anti-fat element within the pro-ana movement, we must also confront the paternalistic and

pathologizing gaze our movement sometimes imposes on other women.

Lastly, if I may entertain a little snobbism in me, I find a large portion of fat-positive personal essays and performance art boring. Too often, they provide such a simplistic and linear narrative of complete victimhood to complete pride that it is laughable. I find them devoid of human complexity and contradiction that make essays and art meaningful. The concept of fat pride is revolutionary when you hear it for the first time, but after third or fourth time I begin to yearn for something more real, something that I can relate to.

And most women in America simply do not relate to feeling completely proud and unashamed about their bodies, whether they are fat or not. It's just not realistic. Most women in America, myself included, struggle with our bodies. Or rather, we struggle with voices in our heads and outside telling us how dirty and ugly our bodies are, no matter how we look, and sometimes we end up agreeing with it. I'm not saying that this is right or wrong, but that is how it is.

Through the writings and performances like those I described above, the fat-positive feminism fosters a political climate that idolizes complete pride and shamelessness as an ideal. By doing so, however, we are in effect setting up yet another unattainable set of ideals that women are somehow expected to live up to, just like the "beauty myth" itself.

In such climate, women who feel ashamed of their bodies—that is, most American women at some point in their lives—are made to feel ashamed of their shame, and are thus doubly silenced, because an admission of body-shame or desire to be thinner is interpreted by those in the movement as the proof of their ideological impurity, or as the evidence that she is still under the patriarchal brainwashing and needs to be liberated further. We need art that imitate and enrich life, not those that dictate or condemn perfectly reasonable life experiences of women living in an unjust society.

I envision a new fat-positive feminism that does more than just confronting fatphobia. We need to pay attention to many ways in which fat oppression is embedded not only in sexism, but also in racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and other oppressions. Instead of merely arguing that fat is normal and healthy, we need to challenge the concepts of normalcy and health altogether, and question who is arbitrating these categories and who benefits.

In addition to the army of "fat and proud" women and activists we already have, a new fat-positive feminism needs to attract, not repel or patronize, weight watchers, pro-anorexics, women struggling with eating disorders (i.e. those who are not pro-ana), and ordinary women in America who are concerned about their weight either somewhat or great deal. And by that I am not talking about "liberating" them from their body image "pathologies" and converting them to be just like us; I am talking about starting from the assumption that other women's ways of coping with this woman-hating, body-hating society may be just as valid as our own.

Instead of belittling or condemning the vast majority of women, a new fat-positive feminism focuses on dissecting political and cultural values imposed on our diverse bodies. It will promote pro-women and pro-body attitudes by validating creative ways in which women cope with struggles of daily life and breaking the silence and isolation that separate us. The fat-positive feminist movement must take over the mainstream, rather than settling with the consolation of being the righteous fringe—and we can do so without

compromising any of the key progressive values.

Along with the rampant violence against women, fat oppression is one of the oppressions targeting especially women that is so ubiquitous that it can be readily identified once one begins to notice it. This fact suggests that fat-positive feminism could be an entry point for millions of women to embrace a full range of progressive politics that seek to create a more just and equitable society.

So far, the fat-positive feminism has been able to enlist only a relatively small number of women—and from a relatively thin socioeconomic layer of the society—partly due to the problems discussed above. If we were to change how the society ranks and regulates our bodily differences, instead of secluding ourselves in the homogeneous enclaves of affinity groups who think and act just like us, we must seize this previously untouched opportunity and rally for it.

By combining the passion of pro-anorexics, persistence of weight watchers, and, yes, our fierceness and pride, we will be able to bring in millions of women and men (and people of other genders) into progressive social change movements. And then, the fat-positive feminism will become a new common sense in the American mainstream.

*I Love My Cunt.*

"I love my cunt." That's what the pin button on my t-shirt says, a pink mass-manufactured feel-good pop-feminist symbol stuck on my chest. In fact, I almost bought a pair of tiny "I Love My Cunt" panties I found online before I realized that my ass wouldn't actually fit into one of those "large" size.

Can you believe it? The society apparently believes that fat women don't wear panties. Yes they do! Or maybe they believe that fat girls love, LUV, big, bulky, beige undergarments that look like they've been recycled from old newspaper, you can almost see the headline: "President Denies the Cigar Incident."

Of course as an Asian girl, I'm not even supposed to exist. Women of other races can be fat, and still exist, albeit as a joke, an object of ridicule. Fat Asian girls on the other hand are simply non-existent anywhere. Nowadays you can pick from 147 channels beaming from the space, but you still won't find me, I guess I'm really original, some sort of perverse exotic.

Which sucks for me as a sex worker though, because there is no such niche genre of fat Asian girl fetishism. It seems to me that all the Asian fetishists like their Asian girls skinny, and all the fat fetishists want their fat girls with huge tits and asses, not typical for Asian women. But no matter how many men think that I'm some pathetic fat ugly whore-wannabe of some unknown nationality (cuz I cannot possibly be an Asian), I find comfort in the fact that they still pay me for my pussy, and not the other way around.

That brings us back to the subject of cunts: I love 'em. But one time, I had a friend tell me that she didn't have a cunt. "Yeah?" I said, not knowing whether to begin my pop-feminist cunt-is-a-sacred-word-that-came-from-some-foreign-goddess routine, as factually dubious and culturally appropriating as it may be, before I remembered that she was a transsexual woman. Awkward silence was broken when she said, "well I feel like I have a vagina, but not a cunt."

Vagina? It was a new piece of information to me, because I didn't know that she had one of *those*. You see, cunt is a general word for the whole region which may or may not include any specific part. But vagina, it means something very very specific: the hole. "Well it's not about how it looks," she said, "I feel like I have a vagina. I can feel it inside. But not cunt. What about you? Do you really love your cunt?"

I knew immediately that it was my fault. I invited this question redirected to me by asking too many questions. "I don't know," I said, which wasn't fair because she had answered all of my questions unlike me. But I hadn't really thought about having any part of the body to love or to hate. I mean, wasn't "I Love My Cunt" some kind of feminist cliché anyway? Does it mean anything? But the more I think about whether or not I love or hate my cunt, or the rest of the body for that matter, I feel lost, unable to point finger at whatever it is that I am supposed to think about.

I think of these men in white gowns putting an stainless specula between my thighs to size me up, the nurse holding a polaroid camera while another nurse held down my arms. I think, is this my cunt, or is this yours? I don't even know what my cunt looked like before that metal touched my skin. I don't even know

how it felt if it was my fingers touching me, and not theirs covered up in yellowy white latex.

I think of that man who dragged me into the back seat of a red sedan on Valencia. I think, is this my body, or is this yours? I think of my invisible fat Asian body, my ridiculed, despised, and still paid for body, am I yours, or am I mine? I dissociate from reality, I skip time and space, I get lost from my body, in my body, out of my body. Now.

I live outside of feminist slogans: loving one's body is nice, but for me it's a luxury. I am too busy trying to love myself to love my stains, scars, memories. But one can feel something that's missing outside, it's more than imagination or fantasy; it's the purest form of self-acceptance in a world that hates my body.

# Degrade

*December 15, 2002*

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degradation  
is not trading sex for money  
but it is exchange  
of social security number for food

degradation  
is not stripping away minidress  
but it is not having curtain  
covering me in a public shower

degradation  
is not faking orgasms on the phone  
but it is faking compliance  
with the court order

degradation  
is not even being raped on the street  
but it is the doctor asking me  
“why does it bother you if you fuck strangers anyway?”

# To A Doctor Who Suggested That We Agree to Disagree

*December 15, 2002*

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it is not because  
of your ignorant comments, or  
flawed logic or the disagreement  
between us that  
i felt betrayed by you

it is that you  
refused to play out the role  
of the evil mastermind, that you  
refused to answer questions i  
was never allowed to ask,  
that you refused to explain the whole  
grand plan, that you  
refused to be the mad scientist i  
remembered my childhood  
doctors as, that you refused  
to  
be  
anything  
but a regular rich straight white  
male that you actually are

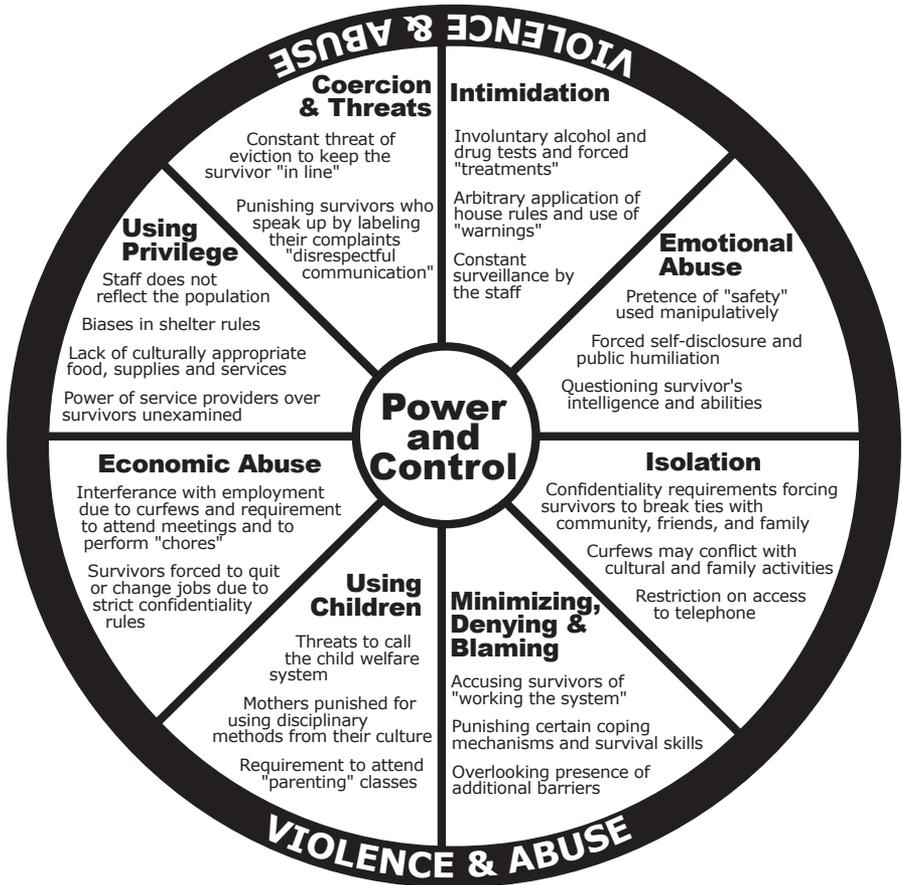
# Pop Quiz on Transracial Adoption

May 4, 2004

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1. Why do we have constant over-representation of children of color in the adoption market compared to white children?
2. Why do we have constant over-representation of white potential adoptive families in the adoption market compared to families of color?
- 3) Why was there a surge of international adoption from Korea in the 50s, and from Vietnam and Cambodia in the 70s? Why were there so many orphans in these countries?
4. What is the relationship between the decline of welfare benefits and social services to poor families, the expansion of the War on Drugs and the Prison Industrial Complex, the increase of upper-middle-class welfare (disguised as “tax credits”) given to adoptive families, and the increase of transracial adoptions?
5. Among the children involuntarily removed from families of color, are the majority of them abused? Or, are they “neglected,” which could mean that parents could not provide enough food, medical care, or personal attention due to poverty, homelessness, “workfare” requirements, or other social and economic constraints?
6. For which group of foreign-born individuals has the Department of Homeland Security relaxed immigration laws to the point that they are automatically granted U.S. citizenship at the moment of entry into the United States? How did that happen when all other immigrants are being stripped of their rights in the aftermath of 9/11?
7. How often do Child Welfare offices intervene to stop the particular form of child abuse known as “parental racism toward their adopted child”?
8. Which group of children are cheaper than others to adopt? Which ones are given away for free?
9. How much does it cost to adopt and to raise a child? If that money were given to the birth parents of these children or to their communities, would it still be necessary for them to give up their child?
10. Was there a time in the U.S. history when the white government did not promote breaking down of families and communities of color, through Slavery, forced schooling, internment, incarceration, etc.?

# Abuse of Power & Control within the Domestic Violence Shelter: A New “Power & Control” Wheel



© 2002 Emi Koyama + Lauren Martin

This “power and control wheel” was created by Emi Koyama and Lauren Martin to illustrate how domestic violence shelters may inadvertently abuse power and control over survivors who seek services from them. In no way is this meant to discount the fact that advocates have been doing, and continue to do, extremely important and life-saving work. Rather, it is meant to incite discussion as to what we still need to work on in our empowerment-based and social change advocacy. Please contact Survivor Project at (503) 288-3191 or [info@survivorproject.org](mailto:info@survivorproject.org) if you are interested in distributing this wheel.

# The Transfeminist Manifesto

Last Revised on July 26, 2001

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## Introduction

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented broadening of American feminist movement as a result of the participation of diverse groups of women. When a group of women who had previously been marginalized within the mainstream of the feminist movement broke their silence, demanding their rightful place within it, they were first accused of fragmenting feminism with trivial matters, and then were eventually accepted and welcomed as a valuable part of the feminist thought. We have become increasingly aware that the diversity is our strength, not weakness. No temporary fragmentation or polarization is too severe to nullify the ultimate virtues of inclusive coalition politics.

Every time a group of women previously silenced begins to speak out, other feminists are challenged to rethink their idea of whom they represent and what they stand for. While this process sometimes leads to a painful realization of our own biases and internalized oppressions as feminists, it eventually benefits the movement by widening our perspectives and constituency. It is under this understanding that we declare that the time has come for trans women to openly take part in the feminist revolution, further expanding the scope of the movement.

“Trans” is often used as an inclusive term encompassing a wide range of gender norm violations that involve some discontinuity between one’s sex assigned at birth to her or his gender identity and/or expression. For the purpose of this manifesto, however, the phrase “trans women” is at times used to refer to those individuals who identify, present or live more or less as women despite their birth sex assignment to the contrary. “Trans men,” likewise, is used to describe those who identify, present, or live as men despite the fact that they were perceived otherwise at birth. While this operational definition leaves out many trans people who do not conform to the male/female dichotomy or those who are transgendered in other ways, it is our hope that they will recognize enough similarities between issues that we all face and find our analysis somewhat useful in their own struggles as well.

*Transfeminism* is primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. It is also open to other queers, intersex people, trans men, non-trans women, non-trans men and others who are sympathetic toward needs of trans women and consider their alliance with trans women to be essential for their own liberation. Historically, trans men have made greater contribution to feminism than trans women. We believe that it is imperative that more trans women start participating in the feminist movement alongside others for our liberation.

*Transfeminism* is not about taking over existing feminist institutions. Instead, it extends and advances feminism as a whole through our own liberation and coalition work with all others. It stands up for trans and non-trans women alike, and asks non-trans women to stand up for trans women in return. *Transfeminism* embodies feminist coalition politics in which women from different backgrounds stand up for each other, because if we do not stand for each other, nobody will.

## Primary Principles

Primary principles of *transfeminism* are simple. First, it is our belief that each individual has the right to define her or his own identities and to expect society to respect them. This also includes the right to express our gender without fear of discrimination or violence. Second, we hold that we have the sole right to make decisions regarding our own bodies, and that no political, medical or religious authority shall violate the integrity of our bodies against our will or impede our decisions regarding what we do with them.

However, no one is completely free from the existing social and cultural dynamics of the institutionalized gender system. When we make any decisions regarding our gender identity or expression, we cannot escape the fact that we do so in the context of the patriarchal binary gender system. Trans women in particular are encouraged and sometimes required to adopt the traditional definition of femininity in order to be accepted and legitimized by the medical community, which has appointed itself as the arbiter of who is genuinely woman enough and who is not. Trans women often find themselves having to “prove” their womanhood by internalizing gender stereotypes in order to be acknowledged as women or to receive hormonal and surgical interventions. This practice is oppressive to trans and non-trans women alike, as it denies uniqueness of each woman.

*Transfeminism* holds that nobody shall be coerced into or out of personal decisions regarding her or his gender identity or expression in order to be a “real” woman or a “real” man. We also believe that nobody should be coerced into or out of these personal decisions in order to qualify as a “real” feminist.

As trans women, we have learned that our safety is often dependent on how well we can “pass” as “normal” women; as transfeminists, we find ourselves constantly having to negotiate our need for safety and comfort against our feminist principles. *Transfeminism* challenges all women, including trans women, to examine how we all internalize heterosexist and patriarchal mandates of genders and what global implications our actions entail; at the same time, we make it clear that it is not the responsibility of a feminist to rid herself of every resemblance to the patriarchal definition of femininity. Women should not be accused of reinforcing gender stereotypes for making personal decisions, even if these decisions appear to comply with certain gender roles; such a purity test is disempowering to women because it denies our agency, and it will only alienate a majority of women, trans or not, from taking part in the feminist movement.

*Transfeminism* believes in the notion that there are as many ways of being a woman as there are women, that we should be free to make our own decisions without guilt. To this end, *transfeminism* confronts social and political institutions that inhibit or narrow our individual choices, while refusing to blame individual women for making whatever personal decisions. It is unnecessary -- in fact *oppressive* -- to require women to abandon their freedom to make personal choices to be considered a true feminist, for it will only replace the rigid patriarchal construct of ideal femininity with a slightly modified feminist version that is just as rigid. *Transfeminism* believes in fostering an environment where women’s individual choices are honored, while scrutinizing and challenging institutions that limit the range of choices available to them.

## The Question of Male Privilege

Some feminists, particularly radical lesbian feminists, have accused trans women and men of benefiting from male privilege. Male-to-female transsexuals, they argue, are socialized as boys and thus given male privilege; female-to-male transsexuals on the other hand are characterized as traitors who have abandoned their sisters in a pathetic attempt to acquire male privilege. *Transfeminism* must respond to this criticism, because it has been used to justify discrimination against trans women and men within some feminist circles.

When confronted with such an argument, a natural initial response of trans women is to deny ever having any male privilege whatsoever in their lives. It is easy to see how they would come to believe that being born male was more of a burden than a privilege: many of them despised having male bodies and being treated as boys as they grew up. They recall how uncomfortable it felt to be pressured to act tough and manly. Many have experienced bullying and ridicule by other boys because they did not act appropriately as boys. They were made to feel ashamed, and frequently suffered from depression. Even as adults, they live with the constant fear of exposure, which would jeopardize their employment, family relationships, friendships and safety.

However, as *transfeminists*, we must resist such a simplistic reaction. While it is true that male privilege affects some men far more than others, it is hard to imagine that trans women born as males never benefited from it. Most trans women have “passed” as men (albeit as “sissy” ones) at least some point in their lives, and were thus given preferable treatments in education and employment, for example, whether or not they enjoyed being perceived as men. They have been trained to be assertive and confident, and some trans women manage to maintain these “masculine” traits, often to their advantage, after transitioning.

What is happening here is that we often confuse the oppression we have experienced for being gender-deviant with the absence of the male privilege. Instead of claiming that we have never benefited from male supremacy, we need to assert that our experiences represent a dynamic interaction between male privilege and the disadvantage of being trans.

Any person who has a gender identity and/or an inclination toward a gender expression that match the sex attributed to her or him has a privilege of being non-trans. This privilege, like other privileges, is invisible to those who possess it. And like all other privileges, those who lack the privilege intuitively know how severely they suffer due to its absence. A trans woman may have limited access to male privilege depending on how early she transitioned and how fully she lives as a woman, but at the same time she experiences vast emotional, social, and financial disadvantages for being trans. The suggestion that trans women are inherently more privileged than other women is as ignorant as claiming that gay male couples are more privileged than heterosexual couples because both partners have male privilege.

Tensions often arise when trans women attempt to access “women’s spaces” that are supposedly designed to be safe havens from the patriarchy. The origin of these “women’s spaces” can be traced back to the early lesbian feminism of the 1970s, which consisted mostly of white middle-class women who prioritized sexism as the most fundamental social inequality while largely disregarding their own role in perpetuating other oppressions such as racism and classism. Under the assumption that sexism marked women’s lives far more significantly than any

other social elements, they assumed that their experience of sexism is universal to all women regardless of ethnicity, class, etc. – meaning, all non-trans women. Recent critiques of the 1970s radical feminism point out how their convenient negligence of racism and classism in effect privileged themselves as white middle-class women.

Based on this understanding, *transfeminists* should not respond to the accusation of male privilege with denial. We should have the courage to acknowledge ways in which trans women may have benefited from male privilege -- some more than others, obviously -- just like those of us who are white should address white privilege. *Transfeminism* believes in the importance of honoring our differences as well as similarities because women come from variety of backgrounds. *Transfeminists* confront our own privileges, and expect non-trans women to acknowledge their privilege of being non-trans as well.

By acknowledging and addressing our privileges, trans women can hope to build alliances with other groups of women who have traditionally been neglected and deemed “unladylike” by white middle-class standard of womanhood. When we are called deviant and attacked just for being ourselves, there is nothing to gain from avoiding the question of privilege.

### **Deconstructing the Reverse Essentialism**

While the second wave of feminism popularized the idea that one’s gender is distinct from her or his physiological sex and is socially and culturally constructed, it largely left unquestioned the belief that there was such a thing as true physical sex. The separation of gender from sex was a powerful rhetoric used to break down compulsory gender roles, but allowed feminists to question only half of the problem, leaving the naturalness of essential female and male sexes until recently.

*Transfeminism* holds that sex and gender are both socially constructed; furthermore, the distinction between sex and gender is artificially drawn as a matter of convenience. While the concept of gender as a social construct has proven to be a powerful tool in dismantling traditional attitudes toward women’s capabilities, it left room for one to justify certain discriminatory policies or structures as having a biological basis. It also failed to address the realities of trans experiences in which physical sex is felt more artificial and changeable than their inner sense of who they are.

Social construction of biological sex is more than an abstract observation: it is a physical reality that many intersex people go through. Because society makes no provision for the existence of people whose anatomical characteristics do not neatly fit into male or female, they are routinely mutilated by medical professionals and manipulated into living as their assigned sex. Intersex people are usually not given an opportunity to decide for themselves how they wish to live and whether or not they want surgical or hormonal “correction.” Many intersex people find it appalling that they had no say in such a major life decision, whether or not their gender identity happen to match their assigned sex. We believe that genital mutilation of intersex children is inherently abusive because it unnecessarily violates the integrity of their bodies without proper consent. The issue is not even whether or not the sex one was assigned matches her or his gender identity; it is whether or not intersex people are given real choice over what happens to their bodies.

Trans people feel dissatisfied with the sex assigned to them without their consent according to the simplistic medical standard. Trans people are diverse: some identify and live as members of the sex different from what was assigned to them by medical authorities, either with or without medical intervention, while others identify with neither or both of male and female sexes. Trans liberation is about taking back the right to define ourselves from medical, religious and political authorities. *Transfeminism* views any method of assigning sex to be socially and politically constructed, and advocates a social arrangement where one is free to assign her or his own sex (or non-sex, for that matter).

As trans people begin to organize politically, it is tempting to adopt the essentialist notion of gender identity. The cliché popularized by the mass media is that trans people are “women trapped in men’s bodies” or vice versa. The attractiveness of such a strategy is clear, as the general population is more likely to become supportive of us if we could convince them that we are somehow born with a biological error over which we have no control over it. It is also often in tune with our own sense of who we are, which feels very deep and fundamental to us. However, as *transfeminists*, we resist such temptations because of their implications.

Trans people have often been described as those whose physical sex does not match the gender of their mind or soul. This explanation might make sense intuitively, but it is nonetheless problematic for *transfeminism*. To say that one has a female mind or soul would mean there are male and female minds that are different from each other in some identifiable way, which in turn may be used to justify discrimination against women. Essentializing our gender identity can be just as dangerous as resorting to biological essentialism.

*Transfeminism* believes that we construct our own gender identities based on what feels genuine, comfortable and sincere to us as we live and relate to others within given social and cultural constraint. This holds true for those whose gender identity is in congruence with their birth sex, as well as for trans people. Our demand for recognition and respect shall in no way be weakened by this acknowledgement. Instead of justifying our existence through the reverse essentialism, *transfeminism* dismantles the essentialist assumption of the normativity of the sex/gender congruence.

### **Body Image/Consciousness as a Feminist Issue**

We as feminists would like to claim that we feel comfortable, confident and powerful with our own bodies; unfortunately, this is not the case for many women, including trans women.

For many *transfeminists*, the issue of body image is where our needs for comfort and safety directly collide with our feminist politics. Many of us feel so uncomfortable and ashamed of our appearances that we opt to remain in the closet or endure electrolysis, hormone therapy and surgical interventions to modify our bodies in congruence with our identity as women. These procedures are costly, painful and time-consuming and can lead to the permanent loss of fertility and other serious complications such as an increased risk of cancer.

Why would anyone opt for such a seemingly inhumane practice? While we might like to believe that the need to match our bodies to our gender identity to be innate or essential, we cannot in honesty neglect social and political factors contributing to our personal decisions.

One such factor is society's enforcement of dichotomous gender roles. Because our identities are constructed within the social environment into which we are born, one could argue that the discontinuity between one's gender identity and physical sex is problematic only because society is actively maintaining a dichotomous gender system. If one's gender were an insignificant factor in society, the need for trans people to modify their bodies to fit into the dichotomy of genders may very well decrease, although probably not completely.

However, such reasoning should not be used to hold back trans persons from making decisions regarding their bodies. Trans women are extremely vulnerable to violence, abuse and discrimination as they are, and should not be made to feel guilty for doing whatever it takes for them to feel safe and comfortable. *Transfeminism* challenges us to consider ways in which social and political factors influence our decisions, but ultimately demands that society respect whatever decisions we each make regarding our own bodies and gender expression.

It is not contradictory to fight against the institutional enforcement of rigid gender roles while simultaneously advocating for individuals' rights to choose how they live in order to feel safe and comfortable. Nor is it contradictory to provide peer support to each other so that we can build healthy self-esteem while embracing individuals' decisions to modify their bodies if they choose to do so. We can each challenge society's arbitrary assumptions about gender and sex without becoming dogmatic. None of us should be expected to reject every oppressive factor in our lives at the same time; it would burn us out and drive us crazy. Sum of our small rebellions combined will destabilize the normative gender system as we know it. Various forms of feminisms, queer activism, *transfeminism*, and other progressive movements all attack different portions of the common target, which is the heterosexist patriarchy.

## **Violence Against Women**

Feminists have identified since the 1970s violence against women was not merely as isolated events, but as a systematic function of the patriarchy to keep all women subjugated. *Transfeminism* calls attention to the fact that trans women, like other groups of women who suffer from multiple oppressions, are particularly vulnerable to violence compared to women with non-trans privilege.

First, trans women are targeted because we live as women. Being a woman in this misogynist society is dangerous, but there are some factors that make us much more vulnerable when we are the targets of sexual and domestic violence. For example, when a man attacks a trans woman, especially if he tries to rape her, he may discover that the victim has or used to have a "male" anatomy. This discovery often leads to a more violent assault fueled by homophobia and transphobia. Trans women are frequently assaulted by men when their trans status is revealed. Murders of trans women, like that of prostitutes, are seldom taken seriously or sympathetically by the media and the authorities -- especially if the victim is a trans woman engaged in prostitution.

Trans women are also more vulnerable to emotional and verbal abuse by their partners because of their often-low self-esteem and negative body image. It is easy for an abuser to make a trans woman feel ugly, ashamed, worthless and crazy, because these are the same exact messages the whole society has told her over many years. Abusers get away with domestic violence by taking away women's ability to define their own identity and experiences -- the areas

where trans women are likely to be vulnerable to begin with. Trans women have additional difficulty in leaving their abusers because it is harder for them to find employment and would almost certainly lose child custody to their abusive partner in a divorce if there were any children involved.

In addition, trans women are targeted for being queer. Homophobes tend not to distinguish between gays and trans people when they commit hate crimes, but trans people are much more vulnerable to attack because they are often more visible than gays. Homophobic terrorists do not look into people's bedrooms when they go out to hunt gays; they look for gendered cues that do not match the perceived sex of their prey, effectively targeting those who are visibly gender-deviant. For every gay man or lesbian whose murder makes national headlines, there are many more trans people who are killed across the nation, even though there are far more "out" gays and lesbians than there are "out" trans people.

Trans men also live in the constant fear of discovery as they navigate in a society that persecutes men who step outside of their socially established roles. Crimes against trans men are committed by strangers as well as by close "friends," and are undoubtedly motivated by a combination of transphobia and misogyny, performed as a punishment for violating gender norms in order to put them back in a "woman's place."

Because of the danger in which we live, *transfeminism* believes that violence against trans people is one of the largest issues we must work on. We may be hurt and disappointed that some women-only events refuse to let us in, but it is the violence against us that has literally killed us or forced us to commit suicide way too often for way too long. We have no choice but to act, immediately.

In this regard, cooperation with traditional domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers and hate crime prevention programs is essential. Some shelters have already decided to fully accept trans women just like they would any other women, while others hesitate for various reasons. We must organize and educate existing agencies about why trans women deserve to be served. We must stress that the dynamics of the violence against trans women is not unlike that involving non-trans women, except that we are often more vulnerable. And we should also advocate for services for trans men.

As *transfeminists*, we should not just demand that existing organizations provide services to us; we should join them. We should volunteer to assist them develop an effective screening method in order to preserve safety as they expand their base. We should make ourselves available as crisis counselors and case managers to other trans women in need. We should help them fund trans-specific workshops for their staff too. We should develop self-defense courses for trans women modeled after feminist self-defense programs for women, but which pay special attention to our unique experiences. There may not be enough of us to start our own shelters from scratch, but we can work toward elimination of the violence against trans people in the broader coalition toward the elimination of violence against women and sexual minorities.

We must also address the issue of economic violence. Trans women are often in poverty because as women we earn less than men do, because overt discrimination against trans people in employment is rampant, and because of the prohibitively high cost of transitioning. This also means that abusive partners of trans women have more leverage to control and keep us trapped in abusive relationships. *Transfeminism* believes in fighting transphobia and sexism

simultaneously in the economic arena as well as social and political.

## Health and Reproductive Choice

It may seem ironic that trans women, who in general have no capacity for bearing children, would be interested in the women's reproductive rights movement, but *transfeminism* sees a deep connection between the liberation of trans women and women's right to choose.

First of all, society's stigmatization of trans existence is partly due to the fact that we mess with our reproductive organs. Non-genital cosmetic surgeries are performed far more frequently than sex reassignment surgeries, yet they do not require months of mandatory psychotherapy. Nor are the ones who pursue cosmetic surgeries ridiculed and scorned daily on nationally broadcast trash talk shows. Such hysteria over our personal choices is fueled in part by society's taboo against self-determination of our reproductive organs: like women seeking an abortion, our bodies have become an open territory, a battleground.

Additionally, the hormones that many trans women take are similar in origin and chemical composition to what non-trans women take for birth control, emergency contraception, and hormone replacement therapy. As trans women, we share their concerns over safety, cost and availability of these estrogen-related pills. Trans and non-trans women need to be united against the right-wing tactics aimed at making means and information to control our bodies unavailable, if not illegal.

Of course, reproductive choice is not just about access to abortion or birth control; it is also about resisting forced and coerced sterilization or abortion of less privileged women. Likewise, *transfeminism* strives for the right to refuse surgical and hormonal interventions, including those prescribed for intersex people, and still expect society to honor our sense of who we are.

During the 1980s, lesbians were purged from some reproductive choice organizations because they were seen as irrelevant to their cause. But the right to choose is not exclusively a heterosexual issue nor a non-trans issue, as it is fundamentally about women having the right to determine what they do with their own bodies. *Transfeminists* should join reproductive choice organizations and demonstrate for choice. A society that does not respect women's right to make decisions regarding pregnancy is not likely to respect our right to make decisions about medical interventions to make our bodies in congruence with our gender identity. If we fear having to obtain underground hormones or traveling overseas for a sex reassignment surgery, we should be able to identify with women who fear going back to the unsafe underground abortions.

In addition, *transfeminism* needs to learn from the women's health movement. Research on health issues that is of particular interest to women, such as breast cancer, did not arise in a vacuum. It was through vigorous activism and peer-education that these issues came to be taken seriously. Realizing that the medical community has historically failed to address women's health concerns adequately, *transfeminists* cannot expect those in the position of power to take trans women's health seriously. That is why we need to participate in and expand the women's health movement.

Drawing analogies from the women's health movement also solves the strategic dilemma over pathologization of gender identity. For many years, trans people have been arguing with each other about whether or not to demand

de-pathologization of gender identity disorder, which is currently a prerequisite for certain medical treatments. It has been a divisive issue because the pathologization of gender identity disorder allows some of us to receive medical interventions, even though it stigmatizes us and negates our agency at the same time. Before the feminist critiques of modern medicine, female bodies are considered “abnormal” by the male-centered standard of the medical establishment, which resulted in the pathologization of such ordinary experiences of women as menstruation, pregnancy and menopause; it was the women’s health movement that forced the medical community to accept that they are part of ordinary human experiences. *Transfeminism* insists that transsexuality is not an illness or a disorder, but as much a part of the wide spectrum of ordinary human experiences as pregnancy. It is thus not contradictory to demand medical treatment for trans people to be made more accessible, while de-pathologizing “gender identity disorder.”

### **Call for Action**

While we have experienced more than our share of rejection within and outside of feminist communities, those who remained our best allies have also been feminists, lesbians and other queers. *Transfeminism* asserts that it is futile to debate intellectually who is and is not included in the category “women”: we must act, now, and build alliances.

Every day, we are harassed, discriminated against, assaulted, and abused. No matter how well we learn to pass, the social invisibility of trans existence will not protect us when all women are under attack. We can never win by playing by society’s rule of how women should behave; we need feminism as much as non-trans women do, if not more. *Transfeminists* take pride in the tradition of our feminist foremothers and continue their struggle in our own lives.

*Transfeminism* believes that a society that honors cross-gender identities is the one that treats people of all genders fairly, because our existence is seen as problematic only when there is a rigid gender hierarchy. In this belief, it is essential for our survival and dignity that we claim our place in feminism, not in a threatening or invasive manner, but in friendly and cooperative ways. Initial suspicion and rejection from some existing feminist institutions are only natural, especially since they have been betrayed so many times by self-identified “pro-feminist” men; it is through our persistence and commitment to action that *transfeminism* will transform the scope of feminism into a more inclusive vision of the world.

### **The Posttransfeminist Manifesto: A Postscript**

I wrote *The Transfeminist Manifesto* in summer 2000, only a couple of months after I had moved to Portland, found transgender and transsexual communities and began exploring the intersections of feminism and trans experiences. I guess I was naive, but initially I was surprised when I found out that there was anti-trans sentiments among some feminists, and anti-feminist sentiment among some trans people, because the trans people I had met were the kind of people I respect as both feminists and trans activists. I wrote this manifesto in order to articulate a feminist theory that is decidedly pro-trans, and a trans rhetoric that is rooted in feminism. I think I succeeded.

There are, however, problems with this manifesto that I am not very happy

with. In several revisions I made over the last two years, I fixed some of the minor problems, but there are larger problems that are left intact, because they cannot be fixed without re-writing the entire piece. But I think it is important to discuss what these problems are, and why they crept into this manifesto. Two of these larger problems are:

- Overemphasis on male-to-female trans people at the expense of female-to-male trans people and others who identify as transgender or genderqueer. I take full blame for the fact that this manifesto is heavily focused on issues male-to-female transsexual people face, while neglecting unique struggles that female-to-male trans people and other transgender and genderqueer people face. At the time I wrote this piece, I felt the need to restrict the focus of feminism to “women” because I feared that expanding the focus would permit non-trans men to exploit feminism for their interest, as some so-called men’s rights groups do. While I still feel that this fear is justified, I now realize that privileging transsexual women’s issues at the expense of other trans and genderqueer people was a mistake.

- Inadequate intersectional analysis. The manifesto focuses mainly on the intersection of sexism and the oppression against trans people, yet fails to address how these issues intersect with other social injustices. For example, the manifesto references the critiques made by women of color against white women’s racism within the feminist movement, but fails to address how trans women can become allies to women of color. Again, I hesitated moving the focus away from sexism at the time I wrote this manifesto, as I feared other (non-trans) feminists’ criticisms. Now I agree with the notion that any feminist theory that fails to account for racism, classism, ableism, etc. operating amongst women is incomplete, and I concede that this manifesto is incomplete.

While these are very different critiques, they both come from the same source: the idea that feminists should focus primarily – sometimes solely – on the oppression that all women experience. In this worldview, issues such as racism and classism can be addressed only when it furthers the battle against the patriarchy – for example, addressing white men’s racism against women of color – but not when it is seen as “divisive” for – or rather, exposes the hidden divisions within – the women’s movement. This manifesto for the most part plays into this trajectory while failing to challenge its racist, classist, etc., implications, and it deserves criticism for that. I realize now that, at the time I wrote the manifesto, I did not feel secure enough in my own conviction in multi-issue organizing, and gave into the fear that I would be criticized for diluting feminism. It was through the camaraderie with other fierce women of color, working-class women, and women with disabilities I gained in the last couple of years that I became free from this fear.

I have thought about writing a new manifesto to address these and other insights I gained since 2000, with the confidence and clarity I have now, but for now I am leaving the task to others. If you write one, please send it to me.

*A version of this essay has been published in “Catching A Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century” ed by Alison Piepmeier and Rory Dicker.*

# Whose Feminism Is It Anyway? The Unspoken Racism of the Trans Inclusion Debate

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I.

I have never been interested in getting myself into the mud wrestling of the whole “Michigan” situation (i.e. the debate over the inclusion of trans people in Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival). But I have become increasingly alarmed in the recent months by the pattern of “debate” between white middle-class women who run “women’s communities” and white middle-class trans activists who run trans movement. It is about time someone challenged the unspoken racism, which this whole discourse is founded upon.

The controversy publicly erupted in 1991, when organizers of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival expelled a transsexual woman from the campground, or “the Land,” announcing that the festival is open only to “womyn-born-womyn,” a category designed to exclude transsexual women. Next year, a small group of transsexual activists gathered in front of the Festival entrance to protest the policy. According to Davina Anne Gabriel, then the editor of *TransSisters: the Journal of Transsexual Feminism*, the “stated intent [of the protest] from the very beginning was to persuade the organizers to change the festival policy to allow postoperative—but not preoperative—male-to-female transsexuals to attend.”

[1] Based on the survey Gabriel and others conducted in 1992, they argued that majority of festival participants would support such a policy change, while the same majority would oppose inclusion of “pre-operative” transsexual women. [2]

If that was the case in 1992, the debate certainly expanded by 1994, when the protest came to be known as “Camp Trans.” “In the first Camp Trans, the argument wasn’t just between us and the festival telling us we weren’t really women. It was also between the post-ops in camp telling the pre-ops they weren’t real women!” says Riki Anne Wilchins, the executive director of GenderPAC. According to an interview, Wilchins advocates the inclusion of “anyone who lives, or has lived, their normal daily life as a woman” including female-to-male trans people and many “pre-operative” transsexual women. [3] Or, as Gabriel alleged, Wilchins made a “concerted effort” to “put herself in charge” of the protest and to “force us [‘post-operative’ transsexual women] to advocate for the admission of preoperative [male-to-female] transsexuals.” Gabriel reported that she “dropped out of all involvement in the ‘transgender movement’ in disgust” as she felt it was taking the “hostile and belligerent direction” as symbolized by Wilchins. [4]

For several years since its founding in 1994, GenderPAC and its executive director Wilchins were the dominant voice within the trans movement. “Diverse and feuding factions of the transgender community were brought together and disagreements set aside for the common good,” JoAnn Roberts describes of the formation of the organization. But like Gabriel, many initial supporters of GenderPAC became critical of it as Wilchins shifted its focus from advocating for rights of transgender people to fighting all oppressions based on genders including sexism and heterosexism. Dissenters founded alternative political organizations specifically working for trans people’s rights. [5]

Similarly, five transsexual women including Gabriel released a joint statement just few days before the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival 2000 criticizing both festival organizers and Wilchins as "untenable, anti-feminist, and ultimately oppressive of women, both transsexual and non-transsexual." Wilchins' tactics were too adversarial, confrontational and disrespectful to women, they argued. Non-transsexual and "post-op" transsexual women alike "deserve the opportunity to gather together in a safe space, free of male genitals," because "male genitals can be so emblematic of male power and sexual dominance that their presence at a festival... is inappropriate." They further stated that "people with male genitals who enter the Festival risk offending and oppressing other attendees." [6]

"We acknowledge that a post-op only/no-penis policy is not perfect," admitted the writers of the statement. "This policy cannot address issues of race and class: specifically, the exclusion of women, especially women of color, who are not able to afford sex reassignment surgery." But it nonetheless is "the best and fairest policy possible," they argue, because it "balances inclusion of transsexual women with legitimate concerns for the integrity of women's culture and safe women's space." [7] Their pretence of being concerned about racism and classism betrayed itself clearly when they used it as a preemptive shield against criticisms they knew they would encounter.

As for the gender liberation philosophy of Wilchins, they stated that they agreed with her position that "freedom of gender expression for all people is important." Yet, "as feminists," they "resent anyone attempting to co-opt" the "love and creativity of the sisterhood of women" for "a competing purpose" such as Wilchins'. [8] The pattern is clear: when they say "feminism" and "sisterhood," it requires any important issues other than "the celebration of femaleness"—i.e. racial equality, economic justice and freedom of gender expression—to be set aside.

Jessica Xavier, one of the statement signatories, once wrote: "We too want the safe space to process and to heal our own hurting. We too want to seek solace in the arms of our other sisters, and to celebrate women's culture and women's music with other festigoers." [9] Has it never occurred to her that her working-class and/or non-white "sisters" might need (and deserve) such "space" at least as much as she does?

## II.

While it was Maxine Feldman who performed openly as a radical lesbian feminist musician for the first time, it was the success of Alix Dobkin's 1973 album *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, that proved that there "was a wide audience for such entertainment" and helped launch the unique culture of "women's music." [10] "My music comes from and belongs to women experiencing women. So does my life... Long live Dyke Nation! Power to the women!" declared Dobkin in the cover of her debut album. [11]

The history of the trans inclusion/exclusion debate within women's music culture is almost as old as the history of women's music culture itself. Olivia Records, the "leader in women's music," was founded in 1973, which stimulated the nationwide proliferation of highly political large annual women's music festivals, modeled after the hippie be-ins of the 1960s. [12] It was only three years later that Olivia came under heavy attack for refusing to fire the recording engineer who was found to be a male-to-female transsexual lesbian. The series

of “hate mail, threats of assault, and death threats” intensified especially after the publication in 1979 of Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which described the engineer as a dominating man, eventually forcing her to leave the collective. [13]

Feminist objections to the inclusion of transsexual women in the women-only space are, on the surface, rationalized on the basis that transsexual women are fundamentally different from all other women due to the fact they were raised with male privilege. Because of their past as boys or men, they are viewed as a liability for the physical and emotional safety for other women. When radical feminism viewed sexual violence against women not as isolated acts by a small number of criminals, but as a social enforcer of male dominance and heteronormativity, a woman’s concern for her safety became almost unquestionable. [14] The effectiveness of Raymond’s malicious argument that “all transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact” was no surprise, given the context of the building momentum for the feminist war against violence against women. [15]

Defenders of the “womyn-born-womyn” policy argue that transsexual women who truly value the women’s movement and culture should respect the festival policies by refraining from entering the Land. “Just as many Womyn of Color express the need for ‘room to breathe’ they gain in Womyn-of-Color space away from the racism that inevitably appears in interactions with a white majority, womyn born womyn still need and value that same ‘room to breathe,’” argued Lisa Vogel, the owner of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. [16] This exact pattern of argument is extremely common in lesbian and/or feminist publications—complete with the comment about how much they as white women respect women of color spaces and how transsexual women should do the same for “womyn-born-womyn.” “I’ve spent years educating other white festigoers about honoring the workshops and spaces that are planned for women of color only... It grieves me to see ‘progressive’ folks attacking an event that is sacred space for women-born-women” wrote a reader of *Lesbian Connection*, for example. [17]

However, another reader of *Lesbian Connection* disagrees with this logic: “If women born with vaginas need their space, why can’t Michigan provide ‘women-born-women’ only space the way they provide women-of-color only space” instead of excluding transsexual women from the entire festival? [18] Logically, it would not make any sense to exclude an entire subgroup of women from a women’s festival unless, of course, the organizers are willing to state on the record that transsexual women are not women.

Another flaw of the “respect” argument is that “women of color only” spaces generally welcome women of color who happen to have skins that are pale enough to pass as white. If the inclusion of pale-skinned “women of color” who have a limited access to white privilege is not questioned, why should women who may have passed as boys or men?

Radical feminism, in its simplest form, believes that women’s oppression is the most pervasive, extreme and fundamental of all social inequalities regardless of race, class, nationality, and other factors. [19] It is only under this assumption that the privilege transsexual women are perceived to have (i.e. male privilege) can be viewed as far more dangerous to others than any other privileges (i.e. being white, middle-class, etc.)

But such ranking of oppressions and simplistic identity politics is inherently oppressive to people who are marginalized due to multiple identities (e.g. women of color) or creolized identities (e.g. mixed-race people). Cherríe Moraga wrote: "In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression." [20] Susan Brownmiller's failure to acknowledge how rape charges are historically used as a political weapon against the black communities and Andrea Dworkin's uncritical acceptance of the popular stereotypes about Hispanic communities being characterized by "the cult of machismo" and "gang warfare" illustrate this danger well. [21]

Combahee River Collective, the collective of Black lesbians, discussed the problem with the feminist identity politics in its famous 1977 statement. They wrote: "Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand... We reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us." [22] It is not simply that white radical feminists happened to be racist; rather, the series assumptions behind radical lesbian feminism (e.g. women's oppression is the most pervasive and fundamental) was faulty as it privileged "those for whom that position is the primary or only marked identity." [23]

Decades of protests by women of color failed to educate those who have vested interest in maintaining this racist feminist arrogance. Here is an example: Alix Dobkin wrote as recently as 1998 "fresh scare tactics were essential to turn a generation of 'Lesbians' and 'Dykes' against each other... when that failed to wipe us out, they tried 'racist.'" [24]

In other words, Dobkin attributed the accusation of racism to the patriarchy's attempt to "wipe" lesbians out and *not* to the legitimate concerns of women of color, effectively accusing these women of color of conspiring with the patriarchy. "What is the theory behind racist feminism?" asked Audre Lorde. [25] She argued, "many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences" because "to allow women of Color to step out of stereotypes... threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex." [26]

### III.

I used to think that feminists' reluctance to accepting transsexual women was arising from their constant need to defend feminism against the patriarchy as well as from the plain old fear of the unknown. I confess that I have given transphobic feminists far greater benefit of the doubt than I would to any other group of people exercising oppressive and exclusionary behaviors, and I regret that my inaction and silent complacency contributed to the maintenance of the culture that is hostile to transsexual people.

This realization came to me, ironically, during a panel presentation in spring 2000 by Alix Dobkin and several other lesbian-feminists about sharing "herstory" of lesbian feminism. The room was packed with women in their 40s and up, and nearly all of them appeared white and middle-class. I was already feeling intimidated by the time the presentation began because everyone seemed to know everyone else except for me, but my level of fear and frustration kept piling up as the evening progressed.

The presentation was all about how great the women's community was back in the 70s, when it was free from all those pesky transsexuals, S/M practitioners and sex radicals (or so they think). I heard the room full of white women applauding in agreement with the comment that "everyone trusted each other" and "felt so safe regardless of race," clearly talking about how she as a white woman did not feel threatened by the presence of women of color, and it nauseated me. Another woman talked about how great it was that a private women's bar she used to hang out in had a long stairway before the door to keep an eye on potential intruders, and I felt very excluded because of my disability. I had never felt so isolated and powerless in a feminist or lesbian gathering before.

The highlight was when the sole Black woman stood up and said that she felt like an outsider within the lesbian-feminist movement. The whole room went silent, as if they were waiting for this uncomfortable moment to simply pass without anyone having to take responsibility. Feeling the awkward pressure, the Black woman added "but it was lesbians who kept the American discussions on racism and classism alive," which subsequently was met with a huge applause from the white women. I kept wanting to scream "It was lesbians of color and working class lesbians who kept them alive, and you white middle-class lesbians had less than nothing to do with it" but I did not have the courage to do so and it deeply frustrated me. [27]

Obviously, many lesbian-feminists—the same people who continue to resist transsexual people's inclusion in "women's" communities—have not learned anything from the vast contributions of women of color, working class women, women with disabilities, etc. even though they had plenty of opportunities to do so in the past few decades. It is not that there was not enough information about women of color; they simply did not care that they are acting out racism, because they have vested interest in maintaining such a dynamic. The racist feminism that Audre Lorde so eloquently denounced is still alive.

I no longer feel that continued education about trans issues within women's communities would change their oppressive behaviors in any significant degree, unless they are actually willing to change. It is not the lack of knowledge or information that keeps oppression going; it is the lack of feminist compassion, conscience and principle that is.

Speaking from the perspective and the tradition of lesbians of color, most if not all rationales for excluding transsexual women are not only transphobic, but also racist. To argue that transsexual women should not enter the Land because their experiences are different would have to assume that all other women's experiences are the same, and this is a racist assumption. The argument that transsexual women have experienced some degree of male privilege should not bar them from our communities once we realize that not all women are equally privileged or oppressed. To suggest that the safety of the Land would be compromised overlooks, perhaps intentionally, ways in which women can act out violence and oppressions against each other. Even the argument that "the presence of a penis would trigger the women" is flawed because it neglects the fact that white skin is just as much a reminder of violence as a penis. The racist history of lesbian-feminism has taught us that any white woman making these excuses for one oppression have made and will make the same excuse for other oppressions such as racism, classism, and ableism.

#### IV.

As discussed earlier, many lesbian-feminists are eager to brag how much respect they have toward the needs of women of color to hold “women of color only” spaces. But having a respect for such a space is very different from having a commitment to anti-racism. The former allows white women to displace the responsibility to fight racism onto women of color, while the latter forces them to confront their own privileges and racist imprinting.

Do white feminists really understand why women of color need their own space? They claim they do, but judging from the scarcity of good literature written by white feminists on racism, I have to wonder. “It was obvious that you were dealing with noneuropan women, but only as victims” of the patriarchy, wrote Audre Lorde in her famous letter to Mary Daly. White women’s writings about women of color frequently lose “sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy” and “how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other.” [28] Many white feminists happily acknowledge ways in which white men’s racism hurt women of color (through poverty, prostitution, pornography, etc.) to pretend that they are advocates of women of color, but often use it to absolve their own responsibility for racism. It is, then, no wonder that those who claim to “respect” the space for women of color simultaneously employ oppressive rhetoric against transsexual people without having to face their own contradictions.

Similarly, the transsexual women who wrote the statement supporting “no penis” policy did not see any contradiction in expressing concerns about racism and classism in one sentence and endorsing the racist and classist resolution in the next. Like white middle-class feminists, these transsexual women felt perfectly justified to absolve their responsibility to confront racism and classism and then call it feminist.

To make thing more complicated, some trans activists who are politically more savvy support “womyn-born-womyn” policy or at least regard it as an acceptable feminist position. Kate Bornstein, for example, “encourages everyone to engage in mutually respectful dialogue, without specifying what outcome might be desirable or possible,” because “exclusion by lesbian separatists” cannot be considered oppressive when lesbians do not have very much “economic and social resources.” [29] Another transsexual woman, in a private conversation, told me that she would rather be excluded from the Land altogether than risk the possibility of a male entry under the pretence of being transsexual. [30] While I appreciate their supposedly feminist good intentions, I must remind them that their arguments support and reinforce the environment in which white middle-class women’s oppression against women of color and working class women are trivialized or tolerated. I must remind them that it is never feminist when some women are silenced and sacrificed to make room for the more privileged women.

#### V.

White middle-class transsexual activists are spending so much of their energy trying to convince white middle-class lesbians that they are just like other women and thus are not a danger to other women on the Land. “We are your sisters,” is their typical plea. Supporters of transsexual women repeat this same sentiment: “As a lesbian who has interacted with the local trans community, I can assure you that womyn-born-womyn have nothing to fear from [male-to-female] transsexuals,” wrote one woman. [31] But it is time that we stop pretending that

transsexual women are “just like” other women or that their open inclusion will not threaten anybody or anything. The very existence of transsexual people, whether or not they are politically inclined, is highly threatening in a world that essentializes, polarizes and dichotomizes genders, and the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and lesbian-feminism are not immune from it.

The kind of threat I am talking about is obviously not physical, but social, political and psychological. It is the same kind of threat bisexual and pansexual politics present to gay identity politics and mixed-race people present to Black Nationalism. Much has been written about the transformative potential of transsexual existence—how it destabilizes the essentialist definitions of gender by exposing the constructedness of essentialism. [32]

In the “women’s communities,” transsexual existence is particularly threatening to white middle-class lesbian-feminists because it exposes not only the unreliability of the body as a source of their identities and politics, but also the fallacy of women’s universal experiences and oppressions. These valid criticisms against feminist identity politics have been made by women of color and working class women all along, and white middle-class women have traditionally dismissed them by arguing that they are patriarchal attempts to trivialize women’s oppression and bring down feminism as Dobkin did. The question of transsexual inclusion has pushed them to the position of having to defend the reliability of such absurd body elements as chromosomes as the source of political affiliation as well as the universal differences between transsexual women and non-transsexual women, a nonsensical position fraught with many bizarre contradictions.

It is my feeling that transsexual women know this intrinsically, and that is why they feel it is necessary to repeatedly stress how non-threatening they really are. By pretending that they are “just like” other women, however, they are leaving intact the flawed and unspoken lesbian-feminist assumption that *continuation of struggle against sexism requires silent compliance with all other oppressions*.

Like Gloria Anzaldúa’s “New Mestiza,” transsexual people occupy the borderland where notions of masculinity and femininity collide. “It is not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions.” But speaking from the borderland, from its unique “shifting and multiple identity and integrity,” is where transsexual activists will find the most authentic strength.

The borderland analogy is not meant to suggest that transsexual people are somewhere between male and female. Rather, the space they occupy is naturally and rightfully theirs, as the actual Texas-Mexico borderlands belong to Chicano/as, and I am merely calling attention to the unnaturalness of the boundary that was designed to keep them out. “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary,” Anzaldúa wrote, “it is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.” [33] The fact that many transsexual women have experienced some form of male privilege is not a burden to their feminist consciousness and credibility, but an asset—that is, provided they have the integrity and conscience to recognize and confront this and other privileges they may have received.

In her piece about racism and feminist identity politics, Elliott Femyne bat Tzedek discusses how threatening boundary-crossings are to those in the position of power and privilege. “Think about the phrase... ‘You people make me sick.’ Think of how the person screaming this phrase may commit physical violence

against what so disturbs him/her... those in power do actually feel sick, feel their lives being threatened... Men protecting male power have a much clearer view than Feminists do of exactly how threatening crossing gender is." [34]

By the same token, feminists who are vehemently anti-transsexual have much better understanding of how threatening transsexual existence is to their flawed ideology than do transsexual people themselves. The power is in consciously recognizing this unique positionality and making connections to the contributions of women of color and other groups of women who have been marginalized within the feminist movement. With this approach, I am hopeful that transsexual women, along with all other women who live complex lives, will be able to advance the feminist discussions about power, privilege and oppression.

## NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Davina Anne Gabriel, from an open letter to *Lesbian Connection* dated Jan. 27, 2000. Distributed on-line.
2. Phrases "pre-operative" and "post-operative" are put inside quotation marks (except when it is part of someone else's quote) because it is my belief that such distinction is irrelevant, classist and MtF-centric (i.e. disregards experiences of FtM trans people). I believe that such over-emphasis on genital shape is deeply oppressive to trans people and contributes to the suppression and erasure of intersex people.
3. *InYourFace* Interview of Riki Anne Wilchins. Distributed as a press release from GenderPAC on Aug. 18, 1999.
4. Gabriel, from the open letter.
5. JoAnn Roberts, *The Next Wave: Post-Reform Transgender Activism* (2000), distributed on-line.
6. Beth Elliott et al., *The Michigan Women's Music Festival and Transsexual Women: A Statement by Transsexual Women* (2000). Distributed on-line.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Jessica Xavier, *Trans Am: The Phantom Menace at Michigan* (1999), distributed on-line.
10. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (1991).
11. Alix Dobkin, from the cover jacket of her album, *Lavender Jane Loves Women* (1973), as reprinted in the re-mastered CD edition.
12. Faderman, *Odd Girls*.
13. Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (1997).
14. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975).

15. Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979).
16. Michigan Womyn's Music Festival press release on Aug. 24, 1999.
17. From *Lesbian Connection*, Jan./Feb. issue, 2000.
18. Ibid.
19. From introduction to Barbara A. Crow, ed., *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader* (2000).
20. Cherríe Moraga, *La Güera*, in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) ed. by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa).
21. Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (1983).
22. Combahee River Collective, *A Black Feminist Statement* (1977), from Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge*.
23. Lisa Duggan, *Queering the State*, from *Sex Wars* (1995).
24. Alix Dobkin, *Passover Revisited*, *Chicago Outlines* April 15, 1998.
25. Audre Lorde, from 1979 speech *The Master's Tool Will Never Dismantle Master's House*, published in *Sister Outsider* (1986).
26. Audre Lorde, from 1980 speech *Age, Race, Class and Sex*, published in *Sister Outsider*.
27. These comments were made at a "herstory sharing session" hosted by Lesbian Community Project in Portland, Oregon in early May.
28. Audre Lorde, *An Open Letter to Mary Daly*, published in *Sister Outsider*.
29. Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaws: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, cited by Califia, *Sex Changes*.
30. From private conversation.
31. From *Lesbian Connection*.
32. For example, see Marjorie Garber, *Spare Parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender*, from *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, no.3, 1989.
33. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).
34. Elliott Femyne bat Tzedek, *Identity Politics and Racism: Some Thoughts and Questions*, from *Rain and Thunder: A Radical Feminist Journal of Discussion and Activism*, issue 5, 1999. Personally, I was surprised to find this article in a radical feminist publication, especially since the same issue of *Rain and Thunder* also published a very hurtful column by Alix Dobkin that appear to endorse violence against transsexual women in women's restrooms.

# Who Is This Emi Chick?

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**Emi Koyama** is a third-wavin' multi-issue social justice slut who synthesizes feminist, Asian, survivor, dyke, queer, sex worker, intersex, genderqueer and crip politics. Emi is the founding director of **Intersex Initiative** ([www.intersexinitiative.org](http://www.intersexinitiative.org)) and has presented extensively on intersex activism, working-class sex worker feminisms, the domestic violence "industry," and other topics at college campuses around the country.

Emi is also the founder of **Confluere** ([www.confluere.com](http://www.confluere.com)), an "alternative speaker's bureau without the (centralized) bureau" and is responsible for putting the "emi" back in feminism via **Eminism.org**.

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# What Is Eminism Anyway?

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Hmmm, I'm not sure. But whatever it is, feminism is incomplete without an "emi" ("fnism"?). A friend said once, "I knew something was missing from feminism all those years—but I finally realized that it was an Emi!" So there.

Recently, it has been brought to my attention that some people take this eminism thing way too seriously: apparently, some (not many, I would hope—contrary to the stereotype, most feminists I know have sense of humor) feminists think that "eminism" is an linguistic plot to disintegrate and destroy feminism. I've also been asked to elaborate what the difference is between feminism and eminism.

Here's the answer in case you are one of those people who take everything seriously: feminism is an actual word; eminism is just a pun. Are you happy now? Besides, it's not like the word "feminism" is so popular these days that someone has to co-opt it in order to defame it.

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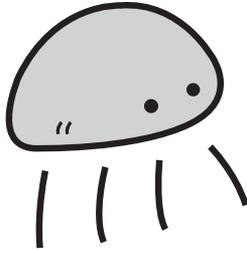
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“It is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence... At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.”

— Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*



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