



transfeminism: *a collection*

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*The Transfeminist Manifesto
An Open Letter to Alix Dobkin
Whose Feminism is it Anyway?*

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THE TRANSFEMINIST MANIFESTO

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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 clich 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 pre-requisite 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 Nontransfeminist Manifesto: A Postscript from Year 2001

The Transfeminist Manifesto was originally written in 1999, when I first moved to a big city and began exploring the intersection of trans politics and feminism. I guess I was naive, but I was truly shocked when I first found out that there was anti-trans sentiment among some feminists, and corresponding anti-feminist sentiment among some trans people. I wrote this manifesto in order to articulate a third position.

The goal of this manifesto was to frame transfeminism as part of greater feminist movement, which I think it succeeded. There are, however, problems with both the content and impact of this manifesto that I am not entirely happy about. I fixed some of the minor problems in each revision, but there are others that are left intact, because they cannot be fixed without re-writing the entire piece. Here are some of them:

MTF-centeredness. I take full blame for the fact that this manifesto is heavily focused on issues male-to-female trans people face, while disregarding issues of other trans people. At the time I wrote this piece, I still 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 in so-called men’s movement do. I still feel that this fear is justified, but I realized that excluding female-to-male trans people and other trans and genderqueer people is not the answer to co-optation by non-trans men. If you are offended by the exclusion, I apologize; if I were to write a manifesto now, it would be different.

Intersections. This manifesto is weak on exploring intersections of oppressions beyond misogyny and transphobia. I tend to agree that any feminist theory that fails to account for racism, classism, ableism, etc. is incomplete, and in this regard this manifesto is incomplete. Again, at the time I wrote this manifesto, I did not feel secure enough in my own conviction in multi-issue politics, and feared that I would be criticized for diluting feminism with other issues. If I were writing the piece today, I would not feel afraid of being criticized for doing something right.

Impact. I have found that this manifesto is far more readily accepted by non-trans feminist women rather than trans women themselves. In particular, I am concerned by how some non-trans women made a hierarchy out of trans women after reading this piece: transfeminists deserve to be recognized as women because “they have done their homework,” but other trannies are suspect. While I want to promote feminist consciousness among trans people in any way I can, I do not support it being used as a litmus test for one’s true womanhood. Everyone deserves to have their identity respected, even when one “doesn’t get it.” I am aware that my writing reflects the class and educational backgrounds I come from, and hope that it would not be used against trans people who do not share them.

I have thought about writing a new manifesto to address these and other insights I gained in the last few years, but for now I am leaving it to others. I would especially like to read a non-trans feminist manifesto – an in-depth examination of non-trans privilege as well as ways in which non-trans feminists’ consciousness have been expanded by working with trans people. If you write one, please make sure to send me a copy.

An Open Letter to Alix Dobkin
By Emi Koyama

April 25, 2000

Dear Alix,

When I first learned that you were visiting Portland State University, the school I attend, I was very excited to have the opportunity to hear from and possibly meet with one of the greatest heroes of radical lesbian feminism. But when I announced the news of your visit to my best friend who is also a very active transsexual/feminist writer and activist, she asked me: "so, are you going to celebrate or protest?"

Just to be sure, there is no question that I would celebrate your work and your visit to Portland. The question is if I should share my views about your works, and if so, how. What my friend is referring to, and what I am struggling with, is what I should or could convey to you what I think about your approach toward trans people and *from what perspective*.

I know that in 1994, you and trans activist Ricki Anne Wilchens, the leader of Transexual Menace and GenderPAC, made a joint statement that "it is paramount that all parties be encouraged to express their views within an atmosphere of mutual respect for divergent beliefs and concern for each others' well-being." In Jan. 19, 2000 issue of *Outlines*, you further wrote "In conversations with transgendered individuals and their supporters, some of whom I like and some not, I am aware of their pain and try not to add to it." These are very promising starting point, but unfortunately I feel that you have not always kept this commitment in your writings, even as you advocate for an open and mutually respectful dialog.

Of course, I have personal stakes which I feel obligated to disclose: I am someone who was raised part of my childhood as a boy (thus receiving male privilege) and now lives as a Lesbian – as in politically, socially and yes, sexually. I am telling you this information not because I feel that my trans-ness is a predominant part of who I am, but because I do not want to act suspicious or neglect my male privilege, however limited it was by various factors (such as race, class, disability, and domestic violence in addition to gender ambiguity) In truth, I have never identified as a trans person, but I am willing to take on the title whenever trans people are being attacked because

I do not intend to reject the trans identity merely to escape from persecution and to assimilate. I just do not feel that I belong to trans communities.

On the other hand, I have been part of the Lesbian community ever since I graduated from high school in the Ozarks and went to a college in a more liberal part of the country. Luckily, I have not personally experienced any rejection within the community for being trans, though other issues such as racism and ableism came up. Sometimes I wonder if the relative importance of my trans-ness was somehow diminished in the minds of other Lesbians because I was different from most of them in many other ways.

Since I moved to Portland last summer, I have been working for Survivor Project, the non-profit organization dedicated to addressing the needs of intersex and trans survivors of domestic and sexual violence, and that was the first time I actually met people who were openly trans. I had in the past worked for the rape crisis center in Maine and the women's center in southern Oregon, and I was at first afraid that joining the Survivor Project might compromise my pro-women politics and cost me the feminist badge of honor. But eventually I realized that trans communities need to be exposed to feminism more and that was something I was in the right position to do.

My relationship with feminism officially started in college, but as far as I can remember I had issues with the subjugation of women and gender roles that were designed to maintain it within my family and in the predominantly Southern Baptist community I was living in. Fully convinced that I would grow up to be a woman, I resisted the vision of adult womanhood played out around me as it did not fit what I wanted with my life. I was not treated as a girl for most of my childhood, but I lived every day fearing that someone would one day discover that I was really a girl who was faking it. I was afraid of growing up to be a woman.

Needless to say, I discovered feminism when I started college. I took many Women's Studies courses and became active with local and campus feminist groups, through which I learned to stop hating being a woman and honor who I am regardless of what the society tells me. I was surrounded by feminists I could relate to, many of whom were Lesbians. I am now applying for a graduate program in Women's Studies and also in the process of editing a book on transfeminism.

Enough about my obligatory self-disclosure; let me get back to the main subject of this letter.

As I said, I feel that there are things you wrote that are needlessly

disrespectful or hurtful to trans people, which interferes with your stated wishes to have open and respectful dialogs. Of course, trans activists are just as guilty as you for perpetuating the pattern of communication that only hurts both camps, but they are mostly not feminists (okay, they probably support “equal pay for equal work,” so in some way they are feminists, but they usually lack the kind of feminist consciousness and analysis on how sexism works) and I do not feel I have much of a common ground with them to discuss these difficult issues.

I am not writing you a letter because what you say hurts me as a trans person (which it surely does, but it rarely occurs to me that I am trans), but because it hurts me as a lesbian feminist to see well-intentioned feminists who have done so much work for women and lesbians (myself included, whether or not you intended this) become involved in an unproductive hostility with other groups of people who lack institutional power. Lesbians as well as trans people are perfectly capable of being hurtful to each other, which only benefits those with the real institutional power. I want you to continue to express your views, as they are often very valuable, but I am hoping that you would do so within the principles of respect and honesty that you advocate in order to avoid unnecessary pain and hostility.

First of all, I am concerned that there is an appearance of dishonesty in your Jan. 26, 2000 column on *Outlines* regarding your question at a Butch/FTM panel at the NGLTF’s Creating Change 1999 conference. You wrote that “the only response” to your question about transsexual people’s life-long dependence on the medical establishment was “a noticeable chill in the room,” but as you are already aware, two of the panelists, Marcelle and Loree Cook-Daniels, have written letters to *Outlines* stating that this is an inaccurate description, as Marcelle actually did answer your question.

Alix, was this a mistake? I am particularly concerned because there is a history of attacks against trans people that are based on dishonest or at least inaccurate information, from the notorious use of Angela Douglas’ satirical piece in Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* and the more recent “pre-op MTFs exposed themselves in the shower on the Land” myth at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. After reading the past several issues of *Lesbian Connection* filled with misdirected hatred toward trans people based on the latter rumor, all I could do was to laugh because some writers demonized trans people to the point it was surrealistic. Of course, I had exactly the same reaction when I heard people from Oregon Citizens Alliance

talk about how surreally perverted gays and lesbians were, but their campaign of hate was so effective that it resulted in murders, assaults, and many, many threats. Please do not think that I am comparing you to Oregon Citizens Alliance, because I am not – what I am saying is that published or spoken words have some real-world consequences, and if we were to have an open and mutually respectful dialog, we need to stop spreading misinformation about other people and start correcting past misinformation.

Secondly, I am afraid that the kind of “openness” you advocate in this “dialog” may be utterly imbalanced, as it assumes that people who do not have trans identities, bodies or experiences can define what people who do are all about. Men define what women are, and straight people define what gays and Lesbians are, and I am afraid that many Lesbian feminists that I respect so much are defining what trans people are.

For example, you repeatedly suggest that FTM transsexual individuals are “girls” who are “fleeing womanhood” because of “impatience for male power and privilege combined with monumental lack of faith in the future of women” in the same issue of *Outlines*. There is a difference between making a feminist analysis on how sexism/heterosexism and male/heterosexual privilege may pressure Lesbians to “transition” genders (which, I think, is a reasonable feminist proposition that I can support), and making a blanket statement about motives of transsexual people in complete disregard of what they say about themselves. “Pressure to transition” is certainly an area that needs to be investigated further, since the trans movement so far has not, out of its male/MTF-centered ignorance, paid much attention to FTM-specific experiences, but each transsexual people are individuals who are entitled to their own reasons for transitioning.

By assuming that people who transition from female to male are merely fleeing from their marginalized status as women and as Lesbians, you are basically accusing them of lower consciousness than you. But many FTM transsexual people I know are highly principled pro-feminist men (way more so than any non-transsexual men I have ever met) who do not deserve such an accusation. Of course, there are FTM people who are indeed misogynist, but they should be criticized for what they do (i.e. specific actions that are oppressive to women) or what they say (i.e. specific comments that are misogynist), rather than what they see themselves as. You are entitled to make your own judgements about what they do or say based on the feminist principles as you see fit, but people who are not transsexual should not define

who transsexual people are or assume what they think.

Your argument that MTF transsexual people's perception of the genuine female psychosocial experiences cannot be trusted because "men (patriarchy) invented 'masculine' and 'feminine' and defined everything including what 'woman' means, for the purpose of control and domination," and "men were forced to then project onto women a suppressed portion of male character" (*Just Out*, April 21, 2000) is actually something I agree with. Like you, I am highly skeptical of the inner perception that one is "really a woman" when it comes from someone who was raised as a boy, for the same reason. But why does this have to preclude MTF transsexual people from identifying themselves as women? Again, you are assuming the motives and/or perceptions held by a whole group of people, instead of criticizing specific actions or beliefs that are oppressive to women.

My identity as a woman is not so much about me internally, but is more relational; that is, I feel most comfortable, genuine and honest relating to people around me as a woman, a Lesbian and a feminist, despite the fact this will put me on the margin of the larger society. As an Asian American with a physical disability, I had always known that I was a little bit different from most women around me, but it had not kept me from identifying with (and being accepted by) other women and Lesbians. I say my life is a woman's life not because it fits the stereotype of a woman (which it does in some ways and it doesn't in other ways), but simply because it is lived by a woman.

I even identify with your reluctance to allow medical establishment primarily run by men to "make a woman out of a man." Transsexual bodies, like women's bodies, are needlessly and invasively medicalized and pathologized by the patriarchal medical authority that claims ultimate ownership to them. I am thankful to Janice Raymond for initiating the feminist critique in *The Transsexual Empire* of the medical fabrication of what it means to be a man, a woman, and/or a transsexual, which was oppressive to women as well as to transsexual people. I was having a conversation the other day with Naomi Scheman, a leading feminist philosopher at University of Minnesota, and I was struck by her insight that transsexual people are deprived of their past by the medical mandate that one has to have continuously experienced "gender dysphoria" (which is a funny term, because I am pretty euphoric about my gender as a woman) throughout her or his life in order to be considered for hormonal and/or surgical procedure.

That is, while a gay person may have past heterosexual relationships and a Christian may have “sinful” days of the past, but transsexual people are not allowed, under the current medical standards, to have the past in which they were not transsexual. This is what I call an institutionalized transphobic oppression.

While I agree with you that hormonal or surgical treatment does not make someone a woman or a man, I disagree with your perspective that the determination of one’s sex by the doctor and parents at birth and sustained through childhood is final, as it takes away the power to name self from the hands of individuals. This is not about defining “women,” but resisting the medical definition of sexes and defining for ourselves what we are, of which sex is just a small, albeit a significant, part. I understand your disgust at the state of the medical establishment, but I hope you would not translate it into a disgust at the group that is among the most vulnerable to manipulation by the medical establishment.

Third, again from the same *Outlines* article, you complain how trans people has made a “meteoric rise to the top of the ‘queer’ order.” This proposition is as absurd as conservatives’ accusations of “reverse sexism,” “reverse racism,” and “heterophobia (homosexism).” When you wrote “Doubts and qualms fill the closets of newly silent Lesbians and gay men now afraid of being labeled ‘bigoted.’ Rather than injure feelings or appear oppressive toward a sexual minority, many remain silent,” did it not remind you of how men have been accusing us (e.g. “political correctness run amok!”) all along? I am not suggesting that you are as oppressive as those conservatives who scream “reverse sexism,” but I would say that I am frightened by the fact that you are using the rhetoric, Master’s Tool, that is typically employed by those who are trying to preserve their undeserved privileges. Or, do you actually believe that trans people have the hegemonic institutional power over people who are not trans?

Lesbians and trans people do not get to have loud voices in this society, and we are always afraid of being silenced. I can understand and empathize with you how you must have felt silenced when your invitation to speak at the 1998 Philadelphia Dyke March was temporarily rescinded by the organizers who feared that your presence might make them prone to the accusation of transphobia. But as a woman and as a Lesbian, you must know how much power the dominant group can claim by accusing the marginalized people of “reverse discrimination,” “too P.C.” and “word hunting” into

silencing them. I am not talking about whether or not you intended to silence trans people, but I am talking about the effect such a rhetoric has on people who are already marginalized and in a lot of pain. I wish that you would realize that it does not help facilitate – and in fact it threatens – an open and mutually respectful dialog which you promote.

Lastly, I would like to propose the use of language that does not compromise your views while respecting and not hurting people you have no intention of harming. For example, you do not have to accept MTF transsexual people as “women” in order to stop repeatedly calling them “men”; you could just as easily say “MTF transsexual people” as I just did. Or, depending on context, “people who were raised as boys” would suffice if you are talking about male privilege and/or socialization. You do not have to give up your analysis about MTF transsexual people, but we can actually have the conversation about issues without bleeding each other that way. This goes true for FTM individuals, whom you do not have to accept as “men” in order to stop calling them “women” or “girls.” You can continue to offer your feminist analysis on male privilege, sacred women’s spaces, and everything else just the same without injuring people’s feelings.

Alix, I cannot express how much I respect you for what you have done for women and Lesbians all over the world. Even my friends I met over the internet who volunteer at Lesbian Studio Tokyo in Japan told me that they know about you. And I admire you for not hiding your views on trans issues just so that you would not appear oppressive, as many mainstream gay and lesbian leaders seem to have done. You have a wide open opportunity to initiate a truly open and mutually respectful dialogs across communities, and I hope you will take advantage of it – not just because it is good for trans people, but it is also beneficial to women’s communities we have worked so hard to build.

Sincerely,

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WHOSE FEMINISM iS iT ANYWAY?

The Unspoken Racism of the Trans Inclusion Debate

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]

When they say “feminism,” it requires any other issues such as racial equality and economic justice to be set aside.

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). Cherrie 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 women 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 women 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 non-european 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 things 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 unreliability 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.

Space transsexual women occupy is rightfully theirs, as the Texas-Mexico borderlands belong to the Chicano/as.

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. *In Your Face* 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. Cherrie Moraga, *La Güera*, in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) ed. by Cherrie 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.

What is Eminism?

Mmmm, not sure. But whatever it is, feminism is incomplete without an “emi”! As a friend said once, “I knew something was missing from feminism all those years, but I finally realized it was an Emi!” so there.

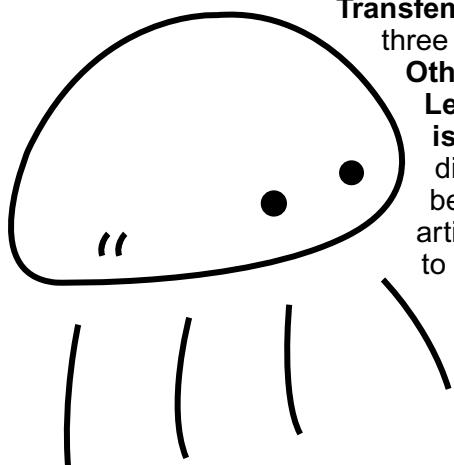
Who is this Emi chick?

Since her birth in 1975, Emi has lived twelve years of her life as a boy, twelve years as a girl, and has been trying to get over it all since her 24th birthday. She nonetheless navigates most of her daily activities as a third wavin’ chick activist/academic, synthesizing her **feminist, Asian, survivor, lesbian, queer, sex worker, intersex, genderqueer, and crip politics**, as these factors, while not a complete descriptor of who she is, all impacted her life.

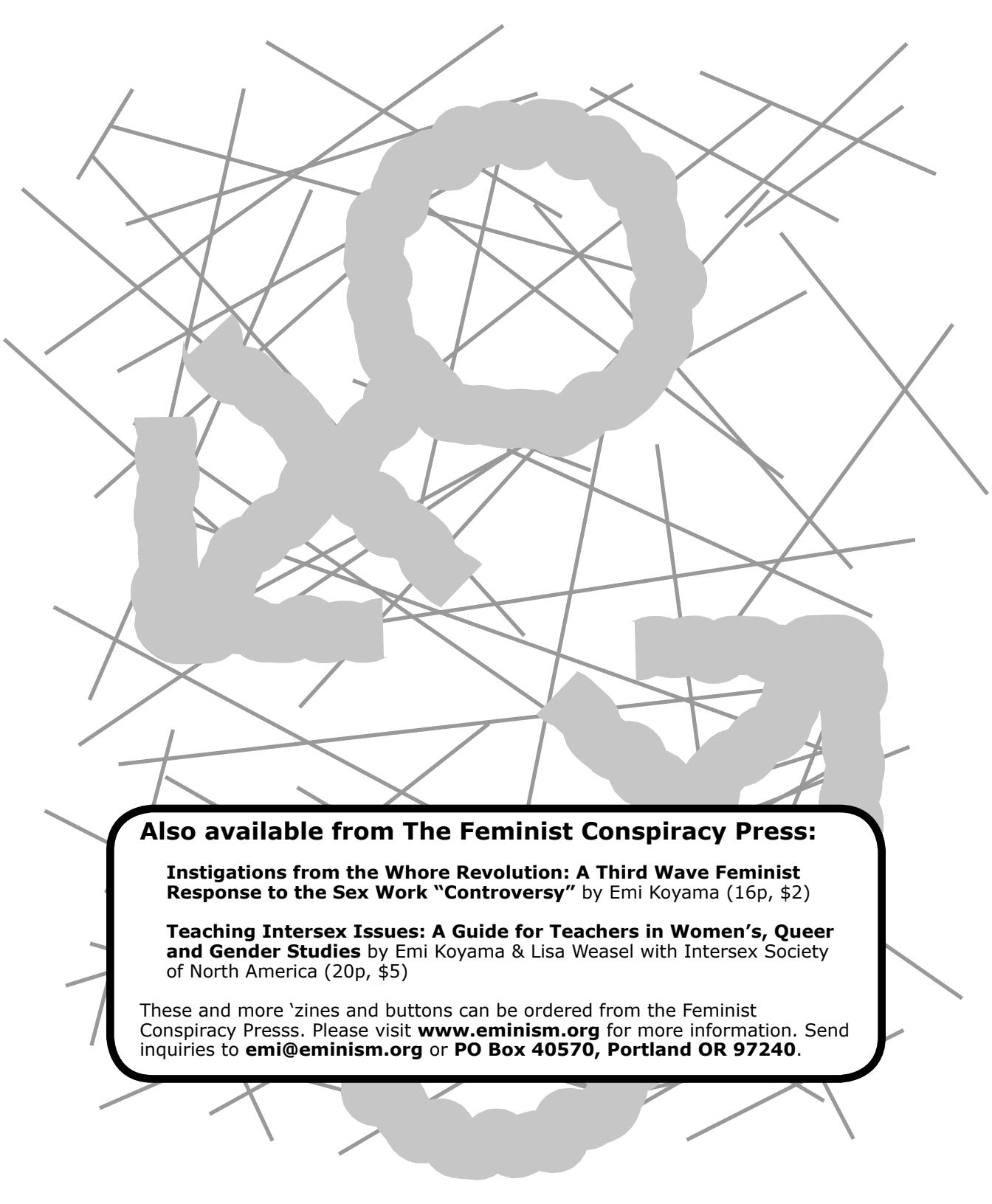
What is Eminism.org?

Eminism.org is the **world’s premier feminist portal site** on the web, where you can read Emi’s articles, view the list of her presentations, order her wacky ‘zines and buttons, etc. Sounds **self-absorbed**? Well, if you ever find a third wave feminist who isn’t self-absorbed, I’d like to meet her/him. Actually, I started Eminism.org to attract more speaking gigs, and it seems to be working. Besides, it’s a **safer investment than Amazon.com**.

About “Transfeminism: A Collection”



Transfeminism: A Collection is a compilation of materials from three of Emi’s older ‘zines, **The Transfeminist Manifesto and Other Essays on Transfeminism** (March 2000), **An Open Letter to Alix Dobkin** (April 2000), and **Whose Feminism is it Anyway?** (October 2000). I once “retired” and stopped distributing these ‘zines because some of their contents became outdated, but I kept receiving requests for specific articles included in them. I created this compilation in order to make these articles available to all to read.



Also available from The Feminist Conspiracy Press:

Instigations from the Whore Revolution: A Third Wave Feminist Response to the Sex Work "Controversy" by Emi Koyama (16p, \$2)

Teaching Intersex Issues: A Guide for Teachers in Women's, Queer and Gender Studies by Emi Koyama & Lisa Weasel with Intersex Society of North America (20p, \$5)

These and more 'zines and buttons can be ordered from the Feminist Conspiracy Presss. Please visit www.eminism.org for more information. Send inquiries to emi@eminism.org or **PO Box 40570, Portland OR 97240**.