

Feminism Must Be Led by Love, or Not At All

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Abstract

Recently, I have experienced a round of attacks by some radical-identified feminists and lesbian feminists for my writings and transgender advocacy. There is a long history of conflict between transgender/transsexual people, especially trans women, and radical feminists and lesbian feminists that dates back beginning in the 1970s. The pinnacle of this battle was when lesbian [...]

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Recently, I have experienced a round of attacks by some radical-identified feminists and lesbian feminists for my writings and transgender advocacy. There is a long history of conflict between transgender/transsexual people, especially trans women, and radical feminists and lesbian feminists that dates back beginning in the 1970s. The pinnacle of this battle was when lesbian feminist Janice Raymond published her notorious book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* in 1979. For nearly 15 years, Raymond's anti-transsexual screed often stood as THE feminist statement on transsexualism. However, beginning in the early to mid-1990s, there was an explosion in transgender advocacy, visibility, writing and speaking out. Within Women's Studies, transgenderism was re-evaluated and seen in an entirely new light thanks to writings by luminaries such as Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstein, Martine Rothblatt, Judith Butler and many others.

I have a unique place in this complicated issue because I came out as transgender in 1992, 20 years ago, at the same time that I started life as an undergraduate and declared a Women's Studies major. I was lucky in that my Women's Studies professors were incredibly supportive of me as a transgender person and an emerging trans-feminist scholar and activist. Some of them knew little about the subject, but they approached it with an open mind and an inclusive feminist mindset. When I first read Raymond's text, I wept because I thought that my identities as a transgender woman and as a feminist were mutually exclusive. But when I began to dig further, I quickly found out that Raymond's view was NOT the only option, or even the most common, within feminism and Women's Studies. In intervening years, I have discovered that her book is so much junk science, motivated by hatred and a narrow ideological agenda based in outdated lesbian feminist ideology. As I read more, talked with diverse colleagues, and began to write papers about trans-feminism, I began to understand that not only were transgenderism and feminism not mutually exclusive, they are in fact close cousins whose work meshes exceedingly well. Queer, feminist and trans movements and theoretical schools are revolutionary, and each compliments the other in helping scholars and activists alike to pose pivotal, critical questions about the nature of gender and sexuality in this society.

In terms of being attacked, this is not my first time at the rodeo. It has happened multiple times

before, and to be honest, I am over it. I stand by my work as a feminist and as a trans advocate, and I am proud of both identities. Transgender Liberation, like feminism, seeks to promote justice, freedom, inclusion and an end to oppression. Both movements are incredibly invested in the dismantling of patriarchy, because women and trans people alike are both so hurt by sexism, misogyny and outdated gender roles. In the past 20 years, I have seen feminists and trans advocates work together, love together and liberate together. There must be no division between trans liberation and feminism because both are social justice movements that can benefit from working together and benefit from the unique perspectives that the other movement brings to the table. Both movements are seeking a radical reorganization of society, one where all people are equally valued, and one where people are not oppressed on the basis of sex, gender and sexuality, among other reasons. The vast majority of feminists today are trans-positive, trans-inclusive and trans-affirming. While the band of anti-trans feminists make a lot of noise on the internet (many do so anonymously--which speaks volumes), they are not typical or representative of the movement as a whole, and they know it. Their echo chamber is on the way out, and thus it is not surprising that they are thrashing around so loudly to try to save their misbegotten "movement." Trans advocates have made tremendous inroads in the past 20 years, including inroads into the feminist movement and into Women's and Gender Studies. For instance, I have been involved in the National Women's Studies Association for about ten years now. I have witnessed the association become more friendly to trans people, offer many more trans workshops and trans studies papers, and grapple with trans inclusion within the discipline and within feminism as a whole. It was my honor and privilege to form the Trans Caucus, which is now very active and making a great contribution both to the association and to the field of Women's Studies. Feminism, queer and trans rights are on the move, and we are walking arm-in-arm to change the world.

The feminist totalitarianism that pervades some dark corners of the Internet is stuck in a 1970s time-warp. Most people, feminists included, have moved on. Feminism is not static, and any attempt to make it so must be thoroughly interrogated and rejected. The trans-feminist connection is strong and will only become stronger in the years to come. Anti-trans venom within feminism must be forcefully expelled and categorically rejected. Like racism, classism, and ableism, cissexism and transphobia within feminist activism and theory is a cancer which must be thoroughly removed. Whether these anonymous internet posters admit it or not, their work is motivated by pure, unadulterated hatred, bigotry and discrimination. Hatred, in all its insidious forms, must be explicitly called out and those who advocate it for it must be held accountable for their toxicity and venom. It doesn't matter that much to me that their hate comes from the left wing, while most anti-trans hate comes from the right-wing, Christianist conservatives. Hate is hate, and hatred in service of a supposedly liberatory vision is completely oxymoronic.

As a trans woman, I have been fighting against some of these types of people for a long time. Some of these "radicals" have declared war against transgender women, particularly on the Internet but now in other ways as well. For instance, some of them are writing to our employers and supervisors to try to jeopardize our livelihoods. This represents a particularly hateful and egregious strategy as these bigots are well aware of the difficulty that trans people, especially trans women, have in finding and keeping employment given the virulent systemic, institutionalized discrimination directed against us. Many trans women are overwhelmed by fighting cissexism and trans-misogyny in our day to day lives, and thus we need allies to stand shoulder to shoulder with us in solidarity. It is vital that cis women, cis

men, and trans men stand in solidarity with their trans sisters to help us fight against transphobia, including anti-trans streams within feminism and other leftist social justice movements. We cannot and must not cede feminism to those who are filled with hate, malice and divisiveness.

In short, we must lead feminism with love, or not at all. Love, coupled with justice, are the two most powerful forces in the world. Without love, there can be no justice. Without justice, there can be no love. As warriors who are striving mightily for justice, we can ill afford to forget the love part. Have I always practiced what I preach in this regard? No, I have not. We all fall short of the glory. When confronted with such intense hate, it is easy to reflect a rage right back that can be aggressive in its vehemence. But going through this has pushed me to recommit to a politicized version of love that is infused with caring and a commitment to ethics. Like many Bloggers, I have used bombastic language at times and fought mano-a-mano in ways that certainly kept the fight going interminably but did little to transform it. I have compassion for myself for doing this, but I also will think carefully about my responses to these things as I move forward as a trans-feminist activist.

Trans women receive venom from all sides: bigoted cisgender men and women, right-wing conservatives, religious fundamentalist, transphobic cis gays, and so-called “trans critical” radical feminists and lesbian feminists. Most people would break from the strain of so much negativity, stigma and hostility. But trans women have a long history of courage, resilience and perseverance. From Stonewall to Compton’s Cafeteria to Dewey’s riots, transgender women have stood up and fought back with every fiber of our beings. I have no doubt that we will call on the spirit of our fallen trans-sister comrades to continue that fierce fight-back movement until we win full equality in every corner of this nation. Feminism, a movement based in freedom, justice and egalitarianism, must embrace trans women as full and equal members of the movement, as sisters-in-arms, or else it fails to live up to its own rhetoric of inclusion. As Barbara Smith said a long time ago: “Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women - as well as white, economically-privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement.” Let us add in our trans sisters once and for all, and let us stand strong against those who would pervert and divide feminism to disenfranchise our sisters of transgender and transsexual experience. It’s not going to be easy, but there is no other way forward. We must lead feminism with love, or not at all.

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