

Politics of Abuse:

Transwomen and the Struggle for Validation in the Feminist Movement

Sara Carrigan Wooten

Feminist theory and its texts are becoming increasingly complicated as identities no longer fuse together, but continue to spread out and divide amongst themselves. With the third wave building in intensity and voice, the general trends in both activism and the academy are shifting from the call for unified female identities of the second wave to more nuanced notions of the disruption of language and breaking of the historical female body. Women can no longer be seen as tied together through a laundry list of qualifiers or a collective memory.

However, amidst this critical and significant change in ideology, feminism has yet to shake itself of the powerful identity politics that have informed much of the movement's past. A line in the sand still exists between women who qualify and women who do not. The reasons for disqualification are as multifaceted as women themselves. Somewhere along the line between biology and destiny, physiology became the trump card of feminists in an effort to exclude and discriminate against those whose bodies often failed checks at the door of a supposed "womanhood." Transgender people, and transwomen in particular, who identify as feminists are being told they do not have the right parts for the movement.

In this paper, I will explore the tensions between transwomen and "biological" women in an attempt to identify how both groups as political operatives share many of the same concerns and goals. I will argue that feminism, by being transphobic, is undoing decades of work to alter notions of what makes a woman, and is thereby reproducing and reinscribing hierarchies on the bodies of real women. These concerns and insights come not only from my own background in women's studies, but also from my participation as an intern for the trans-liberation movement with the Indiana Transgender Rights Advocacy Alliance (INTRAA). My work and personal relationships with transgender people and their allies continues to direct my research in feminist

theory and problematize the ways in which feminism can often fail to recognize and protect its own.

To give the reader a place of reference as to my position within this essay, I will begin by explaining how I came to be involved in the trans-liberation movement in the first place. After two years of failed attempts at finding my calling at Purdue University, I somewhat serendipitously found a home in women's studies. My rite of passage consisted of coming to consciousness in a multicultural education classroom when a male classmate challenged the idea that women were oppressed. I am sure others too have felt the burning surge of anger that rushes through the body when told by an oppressor that things just really are not as bad as they seem. My mentor, a graduate student in curriculum theory, pushed me to develop my new found passion and at the same time, introduced me to his work with the Indiana Transgender Rights Advocacy Alliance.

I had never (knowingly) met anyone who identified as trans before joining INTRAA but was intrigued by the concept of feeling out of place within one's own body. I slowly integrated myself into the organization, accompanying my mentor to monthly meetings and taking on small tasks at different events and activities. I was offered an internship for the summer, and accepted because I had grown to see strong similarities in the challenges that trans people faced and the struggles of the women's movement and felt that not helping in a productive way would amount to failing both. Trans people in general represent an undoing of the gender binary, and an upset in the ways that knowing and defining are generally carried out. The intricate complications and variations of these things is something that I will not discuss in this paper, but I will look at how the stifling borders of identity that are used to police non trans-identified women are also used to control transwomen as well.

Feminism as a concept, like woman, is a point of difficulty in terms of definition. While different branches exist within feminism, such as cultural, radical, militant, and liberal, the politics of those who identify with one or another can differ dramatically from those who identify as the same. Attempting to tie down exactly what makes a woman or who is a woman poses the same problems, as well as designating who feminism should work for. Is feminism for “womyn-born womyn” only? If so, then de Beauvoir’s effectual statement, “one is not born a woman, but becomes one,” – words that freed women from essentialist dogma, are forsaken. Is feminism only for those born with vaginas, those with breasts, those who have been raped by a man or birthed a child? The intricacies of lived experiences, and the ways in which some overlap but are never identical, confound the feminist mission and the need for a collective political body. It is here that we can locate how discrimination and politics of exclusion begin (Gamson 189). An identity politics that seeks the language of “we” often demands that rigid perimeters be created and policed.

Feminist organizations have long been about bettering women’s lives. Rape and sexual violence against women can be considered some of the most powerful examples of historical oppression and subjugation. It is due in part to this reality that women-only spaces have been created and given preeminent importance. Within them women are free of male dominance, the threat of male violence, and institutionalized submission. In 1976, the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF) sprang to life as a safe haven for female musicians often harassed at male-controlled venues (Wikipedia). Since its inception, the festival has drawn thousands of women each year, many of whom identify themselves as lesbian separatist feminists, to spend a week without oppressive “male energy,” including that of their own male children three years of age and older (Taylor & Rupp 43). Such separatist ideology, which is ultimately entrenched in an

essentialist and reductionist viewpoint, pushes women to remove themselves from patriarchy often by becoming political lesbians (Taylor & Rupp 45). Such spaces are viewed by some feminists as misguided strongholds because they neglect the realities that a vast number of women do not have the means of removing themselves completely from men or male-dominated cultures (hooks 26).

In complicated arenas like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the question of what feminist theory is and who it should serve becomes increasingly important. The multiple and interweaving definitions, ideas, and contexts of feminism which allow for a wide-range of experiences and understandings are lumped together in a false sense of collective truth and can explode in discriminatory manners. When the question is how feminism should construct and define itself, if at all, "we need theory that will enable us to articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting upon) gender without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them" (Scott 33). When the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival invokes a "womyn-born womyn" policy that claims to protect and secure the safety of an imagined pure womanhood, the definitions and circumstances under which "womyn-born womyn" is created are already mired in patriarchal and misogynistic understandings of the female body and its actions (Alcoff 406). These sites, which are created out of the purest of intentions to make space for women, ignore that their concept of "woman" has already been determined to an extent for them, and thus these sites ultimately begin to reproduce the very hierarchies that they were created to destroy. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival seeks to define women on its own terms, but never problematizes the act of defining itself (Alcoff 407).

"When the concept of 'woman' is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not

denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person's relative position, just as the position of a pawn on a chessboard is considered safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to other chess pieces" (Alcoff 433).

Transwomen are defined solely by their bodies, instead of their greater place within society and what that placement represents. Discrimination against them is fundamentally based on sexist attitudes towards women in general and the assumption that no one would ever willingly choose to be a woman. While the concept of choice in regards to trans experiences is one that remains too complicated for this discussion, I will say that in my experience with the people I have worked with for INTRAA, the decision to transition most often carries only one other option: suicide. These realities are what feminism has often refused to pay attention to in favor of continuing a counter-productive cycle of defining to exclude.

The trans-liberation movement in recent years has centered its focus on protecting transgender people from physical and sexual violence through hate crimes legislation and amended human rights ordinances (Valentine 28). For transgender activists, the door of exclusion is often slammed on multiple sides when coalition building with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and women's groups, or partnerships are made merely to tokenize transgender representation and their causes are ultimately left in the background. This became a frustrating and at times debilitating reality during my work with INTRAA. Having to face the fact that trans issues in general are counted as the Other by supposed allies made the process of political activism an uphill battle on more fronts than necessary. These exclusions are present despite overwhelming commonalities between transgender and LBG and women's organizations and their experiences

of discrimination by the general population, specifically hate crimes and their affects on the community as a whole.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival could certainly be considered a prime example of activism gone wrong. More important than identity politics at the summer's annual lesbian separatist event however, are the ways in which transwomen are often violently abused and mistreated in prison populations. Stories all over the nation are coming to light around this issue, as transgender former prisoners are beginning to stand up and advocate for their right to be recognized and treated with dignity. I believe this is a site of injustice that should be pulling the trans liberation, GLB, and feminist communities together, but unfortunately remains an ignored and misunderstood problem.

Several offshoot projects began developing within INTRAA while I was working for them over the summer, including how to help a local transwoman who was allegedly being beaten and raped regularly in an Indiana correctional facility. The INTRAA Prison Project, as it has come to be known, began as the result of a letter sent to INTRAA by an incarcerated transwoman that I will refer to here as Jane to protect her identity. Jane began writing letters to several advocacy organizations throughout the state in an attempt to gain attention to and help for the abuse she was suffering as a result of her placement in the male prison population. Jane began her incarceration at a small prison in northern Indiana after being convicted of robbery and aggravated battery in 1994. While she had felt as though she had transgender inclinations before being arrested and had completed a round of hormone therapy, Jane was not taking hormones at the time of her incarceration. During her stay at this prison she began estrogen therapy again, but was given inconsistent treatment that she had to routinely fight for. The prison also failed to give her the drug Spirolactone, a testosterone blocker that is often administered with estrogen

therapy for trans patients. As I have not been intimately involved with the Prison Project, I conducted an interview with INTRAA's former Chair, Cianán Russell, who has headed the Project since its inception. When discussing Jane's case, Russell relayed this account of some of the abuse she says she has faced while incarcerated:

“She had been... harassed by another prisoner, and he accosted and raped her. She reported the attack, but [her] attacker was not punished. [He] attacked her again a few days later, and a guard witnessed the incident and [Jane] was given a write-up while the other prisoner was not ... The write-up, as I understand it, said that she attacked the other prisoner, [when] it was the other way around ... She has been extorted continuously by other prisoners and guards for protection [and to] not [be] attacked. She does art and other things, like fixing things for other prisoners so that they don't make her perform sexual favors. The prison therapists refused to call [Jane] by her preferred pronoun, and so she was unable to receive counseling in a hostile-free and unbiased manner.” (Russell interview 2007).

Certainly prison violence is nothing new. Accounts of male-on-male rape in such situations are all too familiar, as are accounts of guard abuse and acquiescence to the hierarchies of prison populations. But the story takes on a different tone when the abused considers herself to be a woman forcibly held in an all-male facility. Jane's feminized appearance, mannerisms, and identity make her a special target in such an environment, adding a deeper level of gravity to her situation. INTRAA continues to work on her case with a team of lawyers from around the country, but because of the obstacles and hostilities faced, progress has been slow coming to help provide her with adequate protections.

A story similar to Jane's is that of Alexis Giraldo, a pre-operative transwoman who was sent to Folsom State Prison in California for shoplifting and parole violation (SFGate). Her incarceration in a male prison, despite self-identifying as a woman and taking hormones to feminize her appearance, was the result of genital-based placement procedures. Giraldo, now free on parole, is suing the California state prison system after being repeatedly raped and beaten by her cellmate, despite her complaints to guards which were routinely ignored. This sort of genitalia-based classification is of huge concern when dealing with transwomen, particularly because male prisons are seen as infinitely more dangerous than women's prisons, and because of the heightened femininity of a transwoman's appearance and demeanor (Peek 1220).

Due to the severely misogynist nature of the abuse that transwomen suffer while incarcerated or in the general population, it is surprising that feminists have continued to separate themselves from transgender causes.

“Despite the fact that many transgendered people are daily the victims of the most intense and public attempts to discipline gender in ways feminists have long criticized, ‘trans liberation’ and ‘feminism’ have often been cast as opposing movements,” (Heyes 1094).

In prison, transwomen are often labeled “queens” and assigned traditionally feminine tasks such as “doing laundry, cleaning the cell, straightening the bunks, and making and serving coffee,” (Peek 1227). Transwomen are routinely made to be “objects” by the prison system itself, and little help is given them by way of prison officials and higher authorities (Edney 2). Because these images of objectification and abuse are so strikingly similar to those felt and understood by “biological” women for centuries, the bite has a particular sting when

transgender realities are suddenly considered on the outside of those at events like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. The wanting and need of "safe" space is felt by all involved, sometimes for reasons that are chillingly similar.

Feminism it seems must look at the ideas of division and unity in ways that alter preconceived notions of who belongs in each category. Unity must expand to include those outside rigid definitions and controlled borders, those who find commonality in the goals rather than the histories. Division should be seen not as a measure of safety, but as a mode of separatism that serves to forget and ignore. My internship with the Indiana Transgender Rights Advocacy Alliance taught me most importantly that it's the difference in experience that is important. The fluidity of histories and destruction of metanarratives is what keeps us all in check and helps to validate everyone's voice and inclusion. Transwomen certainly have a place within the feminist movement, one that is significant in its implications for sexism, misogyny and patriarchy. However it is now up to the third wave of feminism to recognize and embrace that significance. While the trend is toward inclusive politics, with "a feminism that is more inclusive of a profusion of gendered subjects like butch, femme, transsexuals, and transgendered people" (Mann & Huffman 72), there must be a continued decentering of "woman as body" notions in an effort to prevent the tokenization of these groups as accepted but deviant from the norm. Academically, feminist scholars have an opportunity to delve into the intersections of trans histories and those of "biological" women. Sociological, anthropological, and feminist inquiries have been made into undoing the rigidity of the gender binary. However, the celebration of transgender positions within our society that further undo our notions of who men and women are have largely been left to the realms of queer theory. Much more needs to be done to bring the commonality of these emancipatory movements together. The feminist

movement is on the cusp of a transformative moment in its mission and history. The time has come for feminism to protect its own.

## Bibliography

- Alcoff, Linda. Cultural Feminism versus Post Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory. Signs. 13.3. (1998): 405-436.
- Edney, Richard. To Keep Me Safe from Harm? Transgender Prisoners and the Experience of Imprisonment. Deakin Law Review. 9.2 (2004): 327-338.
- Gamson, Joshua. Messages of Exclusion: Gender, Movements, and Symbolic Boundaries. Gender and Society. 11.2 (1997): 178-199.
- Heyes, Cressinda. Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender. Signs. 28.3 (2003): 1093-1120.
- Huffman, Douglas, J. & Mann, Susan A. The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave. Science & Society. 69.1. (2005): 56-91.
- hooks, bell. Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center. Massachusetts: South End Press, 1984.
- Once a Woman, Always a Woman. Michigan State University. 23 Aug. 2007.  
<<http://www.msu.edu/~copela21/mwmmf/once.htm#5>>.
- Peek, Christine. Breaking Out of the Prison Hierarchy: Transgender Prisoners, Rape, and the Eighth Amendment. Santa Clara Law Review. 45.1. (2004): 1211-1248.
- Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. 20 Sept. 2007. Wikipedia. 4 Sept. 2007.  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michigan\\_Womyn%27s\\_Music\\_Festival](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michigan_Womyn%27s_Music_Festival)>.

Rebuttal: Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Sets the Record Straight. 22 Aug. 2006.

Indiana Transgender Rights Advocacy Alliance. 14 Aug. 2007.

<<http://www.intraa.org/story/mwmpolicyrebuttal>>.

Russell, Cianán. Personal interview. 28 October, 2007.

Scott, Joan W. Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist

Theory for Feminism. Feminist Studies. 15.1. (1998): 32-50.

Taylor, Verta and Leila J. Rupp. Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A

Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism. Signs. 19.1. (1993): 32-61.

Transgender Inmate Sues State over California Prison Policy. 20 July 2007. Associated

Press. 2 Sept. 2007.

<<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2007/07/20/state/n165230D88.DTL>>.

Womyn with a Y. 13 July 2007. Our Chart. 23 Aug. 2007.

<<http://www.ourchart.com/node/122536>>.