

The ontological woman: A history of deauthentication, dehumanization, and violence

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Cristan Williams**

Transgender Archive, USA

Abstract

Trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) make use of an ethical, moralistic framework to support specific rhetoric and behavior. Taken together, these form a self-referential ideology that functions to protect an essentialist ontology, which reliably harms cisgender, transgender, and feminist communities. Through an examination of the historical record of US radical feminist and TERF discourses, including first-hand accounts, this article considers how the ontological framework that inspires TERF rhetoric and behavior has functioned as a cycle of moral fulfillment, even as it necessitates the eradication of trans bodies. The article analyzes how TERF morality, rhetoric, and action construct social forms through a sexed binary by relying on an appeal to the natural, which serves to objectify ontological embodiment. It also foregrounds the different historical and contemporary positionalities of trans-exclusionary and trans-inclusive radical feminisms, and concludes with a reminder of the complementary attributes of trans feminism and radical feminism that are evidenced by decades of cooperation.

Keywords

gender ontology, morality, radical feminism, rhetoric, trans exclusion

The ontological question

In the mid-1960s, around the time that the term ‘transgender’ was beginning to appear in medical discourses (Williams, 2014f), groups of feminists especially in Anglophone and European contexts began excluding certain women from feminist spaces. During this period, the excluded women in the 1960s were principally lesbians, as being a lesbian was considered akin to being an un-woman: someone who had left ‘the Territory of Womanhood altogether’ (Koedt, 1973, p. 247). This created a constituency of feminists split in two: authenticated women who enjoyed visibility and inclusion within feminist spaces, and deauthenticated women who endured shunning and had to fight for their

Corresponding author:

Cristan Williams, Transgender Archive, P.O. Box 542287 Houston, Texas 77254-2287, USA.

Email: cristan@transadvocate.com

inclusion. This type of constituency-policing would later significantly affect transgender women, and thus offers important context for the history of deauthentication, dehumanization, and violence directed at trans women.

In 1970, in response to their exclusion, some lesbians began promoting a notion of 'woman' that could be inclusive of their experiences, describing a 'women-identified woman' as one who obtained 'her internal sense of self' from 'ideals of nurturing, community, and cooperation that she defined as female' (Gianoulis, 2015) because she was not 'considered a "real woman"' (Radicalesbians, 1970). Reflecting upon the exclusion of lesbians in feminist spaces, Rita Mae Brown, a member of both the Radicalesbians and Furies Collective, framed the experience thusly: 'those [feminist] women, most of whom were rather privileged and very bright, treated lesbians the way men treated them . . . [Betty Friedan] tossed me out and said that I was the Lavender Menace' (Makers, 2012). The deauthentication of lesbian women's experiences of selfhood to compel them to assume a social context not representative of their truths, experience, or class realities was and is an enfeebled attempt to grasp at empowerment through a form of lateral violence; an animus directed against one's peers rather than one's oppressors. Such empowerment strategies have been disruptive and destructive to constituencies of women.

During a 1979 speech, Monique Wittig (1992, p. 12) described the following experience:

Lesbians should always remember and acknowledge how unnatural, compelling, totally oppressive, and destructive being woman was for us in the old days before the women's liberation movement. It was a political constraint, and those who resisted it were accused of not being real women. But then we were proud of it, since in the accusation there was already something like a shadow of victory: the avowal by the oppressor that woman is not something that goes without saying, since to be one, one has to be a real one.

For radical feminists like Wittig, 'woman' was not a sexed class constructed with reference to an essential or reductive attribute. Rather, 'woman' was defined by material conditions within culture. As Andrea Dworkin (1983, p. 223) argued, it is a system of material oppression that keeps 'women women in an immovable system of sex hierarchy.' Significantly, for both Wittig and Dworkin, the move to root feminism in an inherent biological, psychological, or reified ontology was to endorse the very essentialism upon which patriarchy was built:

[A]s Andrea Dworkin emphasizes, many lesbians recently 'have increasingly tried to transform the very ideology that has enslaved us into a, religious, psychologically compelling celebration of female biological potential.' . . . What the concept 'woman is wonderful' accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories man and woman, which are political categories and not natural givens. It puts us in a position of fighting within the class 'women' not as the other classes do, for the disappearance of our class, but for the defense of 'woman' and its reinforcement. (Wittig, 1992, pp. 13–14)

Wittig (1992, p. 2) further argued that 'there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary.'

Such analysis harkens back to the very foundations of radical feminism. Before Simone de Beauvoir (2009, p. 283) asserted that: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, woman,’ early radical feminists such as Ruth Herschberger (1948, pp. 3–4) noted the cultural nature of the sexed body binary:

As important as the differences in sex organs – the books imply – is that the mature male should possess broad squared shoulders, heavy brows, straight arms, narrow hips, cylindrical thighs, blunt toes and bulging calves. The mature female is chartered by soft sloping shoulders, a short neck, bent arms, wide hips, conical thighs, small feet and knock-knees. . . . For these representatives of the basic differences between the sexes appear to have been put together by calipers and glue rather than by the shakier hands of Mother Nature.

Most cisgender people within US and European culture will, at some point in their life, undertake body modifications to better embody their sexed persona and emulate what is, we are told, a natural sexed body binary. Billions are spent each year on hair care, removal, and maintenance; cosmetic surgeries; workouts; exogenous chemicals; and ‘health’ and ‘lifestyle’ products. Many of these are targeted to cisgender population’s need to embody ‘the True Male and the True Female, the average, the typical, and to judge by a look around us, [the] possibly extinct’ (Herschberger, 1948, p. 3). In a world where most cisgender bodies have biological attributes of both ‘the True Male and the True Female,’ where one in 100 people are, to one degree or another, intersex (Ainsworth, 2015), and where transgender people transition their phenotype from one category to another, trans feminists are joining early radical feminists in questioning systems predicated upon discrete, natural, and unconstructed body binaries. Such ontological questions threaten the moral landscape that sex essentialists depend on.

It is ironic then that trans-exclusionary radical feminist activists (TERFs) have invested decades into promoting a central ideological position, namely that a ‘woman’ is defined by her Nature and/or God-given female body experience. This is an ontological claim; an argument about the nature of being. TERFs perceive a material conflict with their ideological position when they encounter trans people. As with any identarian movement based upon rooting out impurity of form, instead of interrogating their ideology, they attack that which questions it.

The morality

Any comprehensive analysis of TERF rhetoric, morality, or behavior must begin with the political dialectic popularized by early sex-essentialist activists such as Janice Raymond, Mary Daly, and Robin Morgan. The moral reasoning promoted by Raymond in her 1979 book, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, is found in nearly all sex-essentialist anti-trans interventions, from so-called ‘bathroom bills’ – laws forcing transgender and intersex people to use bathrooms corresponding to their sex assigned at birth – to TERF protests at Pride parades. At the heart of the ethical calculus Raymond popularized is an ad naturam fallacy – an argument which relies on an appeal to the natural – wherein cisgender bodies are natural, whole, and therefore good, while transgender bodies are unnatural, broken, and therefore bad. While such a natural/unnatural binary is useful for

Raymond's morality, it is nonetheless a moral trap distracting the cisgender reader from the ways in which they themselves work to construct their own bodies into a binary. As Susan Stryker argued in 1994,

You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. . . . Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself. (Stryker, 2006, p. 247)

Raymond (1979, p. 17) attempted to protect her moral framework from being critiqued as simply an appeal to the morality of the natural, asserting: 'I am not arguing that what is natural is good, I am not polarizing technology against nature.' This might withstand scrutiny if it were not immediately followed by the statement, 'I am making an appeal to the integrity or harmony of the whole' (Raymond, 1979, p. 17). Raymond is not appealing to the body's natural state but, rather, its whole state. Her equivocation seems exceptionally disingenuous as she consistently critiques trans people's implicitly non-natural states through terms such as 'male-to-constructed-female' (Raymond, 1979, p. 3). While Raymond claims that her 'whole' (i.e., unaltered) body ontology is not presented as a moral opposite to that which is unnatural (and therefore bad) she nevertheless appeals to the concept of 'natural-born' woman. For instance, she takes pains to detail that which is non-'genuine' (i.e., 'synthetic') about trans people: 'Instead of developing genuine integrity, the transsexual becomes a synthetic product. Synthetic parts, such as chemical hormones and surgical artifacts of false vaginas and breasts, produce a synthetic whole' (Raymond, 1979, p. 165). Raymond's usage of 'the harmony or integrity of the whole' and 'synthetic whole' implies moral polarities. Consider the following examples:

As alchemy treated the qualitative as quantitative in its attempts to isolate vital forces of the universe within its laboratories of matter, transsexual treatment does the same by reducing the quest for the vital forces of selfhood to the artifacts of hormones and surgical appendages . . . [producing] a surgically constructed androgyne, and thus a synthetic hybrid. (Raymond, 1979, p. 155)

[Transsexuals] purport to be the real thing. And our suspension of disbelief in their synthetic nature is required as a moral imperative. (Raymond, 1979, p. xxiii)

This is an *ad naturam* moral argument. Raymond's morality even privileges her in denying humanity to trans women. Trans women are, instead, represented as 'synthetic products.' When trans people are no longer human in the sense that Raymond is, the moral imperative to respect trans people's body autonomy, identity, selfhood, and life becomes less important: 'transsexualism itself is a deeply moral question rather than a medical-technical answer. I contend that the problem of transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence' (Raymond, 1979, p. 120). While Raymond may claim that she is not appealing to the morality of the natural, it is precisely this morality that enables her, and all sex-essentialist activists who use her moral framework, to condemn that which must be viewed as unnatural: namely, trans bodies. Raymond's *ad naturam* morality deems transitioned phenotypes to be inherently synthetic, violating the untransitioned body's natural 'integrity.'

In *Gender Hurts*, Sheila Jeffreys, building on Raymond, acted to protect her own stake in the morality of the natural. She states that the word ‘cisgender’ should not be used because it impugns the nature of her own claim to a naturally sexed body binary: claiming that ‘cis’ is being applied ‘to all those who are not unhappy with their “gender”’, Jeffreys (2014, p. 50) argues that:

. . . the term ‘cis’ creates two kinds of women, those with female bodies who are labeled ‘cisgender’, and those with male bodies who are ‘transwomen’. Women, those born female and raised as women, thus suffer a loss of status as they are relegated to being just one kind of woman and their voices will have to compete on a level playing field with the other variety, men who transgender.

For Jeffreys, this is a moral issue, and it is upon this sense of morality that she constructs her rhetoric around bodies that are sexed rather than body attributes that are sexed:

Another reason for adherence to pronouns that indicate biology is that, as a feminist, I consider the female pronoun to be an honorific, a term that conveys respect. Respect is due to women as members of a sex caste that have survived subordination and deserve to be addressed with honour. (Jeffreys, 2014, p. 9)

In explicitly appealing to the ad naturam morality within her sexed body, Jeffreys is pronouncing her attachment to and support of behavioral norms and taboos predicated upon a coercive binary cultural system. While we generally refer to such systems as ‘gender,’ Jeffreys’ drive to lay claim to identity labels rooted in a body binary means that she has privileged herself to disregard another’s identity precisely because, within her gender system, such behavior is honorable. With an ad naturam foundation, certain ways of speaking about trans people become honorable, and as history bears witness, those who claim such moral authority do not limit themselves to words alone.

The rhetoric

The foundation of sex-essentialist discourses is a rhetoric rigged to ensure authenticity is forever withheld from trans experiences. Such rhetorical posturing might be epitomized by the so-called ‘woman-born woman’ rubric. The book *A to Z of the Lesbian Liberation Movement* defines woman-born women as:

. . . women who were born women [as] opposed to male to female transgendered persons who may have, and retain, male privilege. Identifying or declaring oneself woman-born woman helps to keep ‘woman only’ or lesbian-separatist space pure. (Myers, 2009, p. 245)

Within the ‘woman-born woman’ framework, there exists a discrete ‘woman’ that is authentic, and one that is not. This approach was institutionalized by a minority of activists at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MichFest), a woman-only feminist event held from 1976 to 2015. When surveyed by cisgender radical lesbian feminists in 1992, 73.1% of respondents said they wanted MichFest to be inclusive of trans women (Burkholder, 1993). However, for many years the festival maintained a so-called

‘womyn-born-womyn’ policy. In 2014, a TERF group produced a MichFest zine booklet for ‘radical feminists’ that claimed to offer an ‘opportunity to answer the following questions: what is radical feminism; where is it going and/or where should it go; and, why and how should women join the movement?’ (Pettersen, 2014, p. 1). The zine answers these questions through assertions such as:

There are and will be plenty of women (and of course, men) who do not put women first in their advocacy work, but instead, will fall for the lies and false promises of gender liberation for ‘all women’ – including men who claim to be women. The transactivist movement is like an invasion of the body snatchers, only worse, because not only does it harm our ability to organize authentic safe spaces for women, but it is harmful to those who practice transgenderism too. Synthetic hormones, puberty inhibitors and genital mutilation are not methods of human liberation and health. (Pettersen, 2014, pp. 2–3)

Within TERF discourses, trans people are rhetorically constructed as the opposite of cisgender: unnatural, monstrous, and dangerous to themselves and others. This reflects Raymond’s representation of the trans experience: the opposite of cisgender body integrity and spirit is transgender body mutilation and violence. Consider Raymond’s (1979, pp. 103–104) argument that

Rape, of course, is a masculinist violation of bodily integrity. All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves. However, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist violates women’s sexuality and spirit, as well.

Thirty-five years later, Raymond conceded that transsexual people do not, in fact, rape cisgender women by merely existing, and explained that the term ‘rape’ was used at that time as a euphemism for violation (Vigo, 2014). However, even with this revision, her meaning remains clear: the existence of trans bodies is a violation of authenticated women’s bodies, sexuality, and spirit.

The way in which the trans experience is represented within contemporary TERF communities is merely a reflection of their own ideological histories. Themes of violation, inauthenticity, caricature, mutilation, and monstrosity continue to feature prominently as a foundational moral dialectic which is re-enacted daily on social media and within feminist spaces. Not only are the bodies of trans people mutilated; the bodies of trans people are ‘smelly,’ as Jeffreys contends (Williams, 2015a), or ‘decaying,’ as Raymond asserts (Raymond, 1979, p. 167).

The message TERF opinion leaders send is clear: trans women represent the wolf in sheep’s clothing; an enemy that could be anywhere, especially in authenticated women’s spaces. For Jeffreys (2014), when a trans woman urinates in a public restroom, it is a violation of an authenticated woman’s human rights. Such moral contextualization of trans women contribute to a social climate wherein trans women are publicly beaten (Amusing, 2011) or sexually assaulted by cisgender women (Williams, 2019) when merely attempting to use the restroom (see also Jones and Slater, this issue).

1970s: The West Coast Lesbian Conference and Olivia Collective controversies

Perhaps the earliest known instance of TERF aggression causing a violent rift within a feminist community occurred after Beth Elliott, a trans woman, asked to join the San Francisco Daughters of Bilitis lesbian feminist organization in 1971. Elliott was ‘honest about her transition and, after heated controversy and disagreements among the members, was accepted, even becoming vice president of the local chapter’ (Gallo, 2006, p. 190). The ‘heated controversy’ concerning her presence in the Daughters of Bilitis landed on a national stage at the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference (WCLC): though Elliott had helped organize the event, a TERF group calling itself the Gutter Dykes demanded that the conference become a trans-exclusionary space. The coming TERF violence was foreshadowed by a preconference phone call to Elliott. The anonymous woman on the other line asked for ‘Mr. Elliott,’ instructed her to not attend the event she helped organize, and ended the call with a death threat. When Elliott dared to participate, the Gutter Dykes violently disrupted the event, physically attacked trans-supportive radical feminist performers Robin Tyler and Patty Harrison, who stopped the group from bashing Elliott (Williams, 2014d), and threatened to continue the disruption unless Elliott was removed.

Some of the controversial discourse was preserved by conference organizer and Lesbian Tide Collective member Barbara McLean (1973, pp. 36–37) in her diary, later reprinted in *The Lesbian Tide*:

This woman is insisting that Beth Elliott not be permitted to perform because Beth is a transsexual. Beth was on the San Francisco steering committee for the conference, a part of the original group that gave birth to the idea. . . . No. We do not, cannot relate to her as a man. We have not known her as a man.

‘He has a prick! That makes him a man.’

That’s bullshit! Anatomy is NOT destiny! There is a contradiction here. Do we or do we not believe that anatomy is destiny?

‘[This is] the most bizarre and dangerous co-optation of lesbian energy and emotion [we] can imagine.’

McLean’s diary also recorded her thoughts on an infamously transmisogynistic keynote address by Robin Morgan:

[Robin Morgan] said that rather than call for unity, she chooses to call for polarity. I’m confused. . . . Especially since the announced purpose for the conference is UNITY . . . I’m angry. I somehow feel betrayed . . . Now she’s trashing us over the transsexual thing. Now she’s trashing EVERYONE. I can’t believe she ever wrote anything about ‘sister-hood.’

For the first time on a US national stage, Morgan’s speech introduced numerous tropes commonly found to this day in contemporary sex-essentialist radical feminist discourse:

[A]re we yet again going to defend the male supremacist yes obscenity of male transvestitism? How many of us will try to explain away – or permit into our organizations, even, men who deliberately reemphasize gender roles, and who parody female oppression and suffering as ‘camp’? No. I will not call a male ‘she’: thirty-two years of suffering in the androcentric society, and of surviving, have earned me the name ‘woman’; one walk down the street by a male transvestite, five minutes of his being hassled (which he may enjoy), and then he dares, he dares to think he understands our pain? No. In our mothers’ names and in our own, we must not call him sister. We know what’s at work when whites wear blackface; the same thing is at work when men wear drag. (Morgan, 1973, cited in Ridinger, 2004, p. 204)

Even in this early example, we can observe the clash between inclusionary and exclusionary radical feminist discourse. Note that the sex-essentialist gaze produces a ‘dangerous’ trans caricature who is taking away women’s ‘energy’ and ‘emotion.’ Such moralistic rhetoric is commonplace in contemporary sex-essentialist discourse, and for sex-essentialist activists such as TERFs, it is a functional moral imperative. Trans people are constructed as monstrous, parasitic, or even embodied caricatures of murderers. Mary Daly (1978) insisted that trans people are ‘Frankenstein’ constructs, invaders bent on violating women’s boundaries, while Germaine Greer (1999) compared trans people to horror movie serial killers who murder their own mothers.

While Robin Morgan’s anthologized version of her keynote WCLC address includes many anti-trans tropes commonly featured in contemporary sex-essentialist discourses, her comments specifically concerning Elliott are often edited out. Missing from the commonly anthologized version is the following call to action, which precipitated TERF violence at the WCLC:

[Elliott], the same man [*sic*] who, when personally begged by women not to attend this Conference, replied that if he [*sic*] were kept out he [*sic*] would bring a Federal suit against these women on the charges of ‘discrimination and criminal conspiracy to discriminate. . .’ Where The Man is concerned, we must not be separate fingers but one fist. I charge [Elliott] as an opportunist, an infiltrator, and a destroyer – with the mentality of a rapist. And you women at this Conference know who he [*sic*] is. Now. You can let him [*sic*] into your workshops – or you can deal with him [*sic*]. (Blasius, 1997, p. 429)

The phone call Morgan references wherein Elliott was ‘begged’ not to attend was the same call that began by misgendering her and ended with a death threat (Nettick & Elliott, 1996, p. 256). After Morgan’s speech, a Conference-wide vote was taken on whether the WCLC should become trans-exclusionary. In *Transgender History*, Stryker (2008, p. 105) recounts that ‘more than two-thirds of those present voted to allow Elliott to remain, but the anti-transsexual faction refused to accept the popular results and promised to disrupt the conference if their demands were not met.’ Having received permission to stay, Elliott took to the Conference stage to play a scheduled acoustic guitar set. It was at this point that the Gutter Dykes rushed the stage intent on bashing Elliott, while other radical feminists used their own bodies to shield her from the violence.

Conference organizer and Lesbian Tide Collective founder Jeanne Córdova¹ characterized the unrest as a seismic event: ‘It was like an earthquake – at first, a little earthquake. Then an 8.5’ (Faderman & Timmons, 2006, p. 191). Fearing further violence and

disruption, Elliott left the event. This incident was later featured in *The Transsexual Empire* as evidence of the essentially ‘destructive’ nature of trans women (Raymond, 1979, p. 85). However, Raymond’s account erases the TERF violence, Morgan’s call to have Elliott ‘dealt with’ and the courage of the radical feminists who used their own bodies to shield a trans woman from a public bashing.

This was not the last time that cis radical feminists stood up against TERF groups claiming to represent authentic radical feminism, nor was it the last time that such events were publicly misrepresented. Trans-inclusive radical feminist groups such as Cell 16 were similarly targeted for their inclusion of trans women. The pioneering radical feminist lesbian separatist women’s music collective Olivia Records was not only trans-inclusive, but trans-affirming, and even provided trans medical care (Williams, 2014b). When Raymond learned of what she apparently perceived to be Olivia’s treachery, she set in motion a series of events that culminated in an organized terrorist action against the women of Olivia and specifically, collective member and out trans woman Sandy Stone. Stone has described how events turned potentially deadly after Raymond began sending letters to feminist groups about Olivia’s approach to trans inclusion:

[W]e were getting hate mail about me. After a while the hate mail got so vicious that the mail room made a decision to not pass that mail along to me. This was vile stuff. A lot of it included death threats. . . . The death threats were directed at me, but there were violent consequences proposed for the Collective if they didn’t get rid of me. (Williams, 2014b)

While organizing a tour to ‘provide women’s music for women in major cities,’ Stone recounted that Olivia received a letter warning them of a separatist paramilitary group of women called the Gorgons in Seattle, who carried live weapons:

We were told that when we got to town, [the Gorgons] were going to kill me. . . . We did, in fact, go to Seattle, but we went as probably the only women’s music tour that was ever done with serious muscle security. They were very alert for weapons and, in fact, Gorgons did come, and they did have guns taken away from them.

I was pants-wetting scared at that event. I was terrified. During a break between a musical number someone shouted out ‘GORGONS!’ and I made it from my seat at the console to under the table the console was on at something like superluminal speed. I stayed under there until it was clear that I wasn’t about to be shot. . . . Not that it would have done me any good to be under there. (Williams, 2014b)

Raymond (1979, pp. 101–102) herself addressed Stone’s involvement in Olivia Records in *The Transsexual Empire*:

Stone is not only crucial to the Olivia enterprise but plays a very dominant role there. . . . This only serves to enhance his [*sic*] previously dominant role and to divide women, as men [*sic*] frequently do, when they make their presence necessary and vital to women. Having produced such divisiveness, one would think that if Stone’s commitment to and identification with women were genuinely woman-centered, he [*sic*] would have removed himself from Olivia and assumed some responsibility for the divisiveness.

In Raymond's account, TERF violence is erased and, in its place, appears a perverse caricature of Stone which acts as the narrative source of 'divisiveness' – a profane euphemism for the violent threats this trans-inclusive radical feminist women's collective faced. Ginny Berson, a radical feminist and co-founder of both the Furies and Olivia collectives, responded to Raymond's description:

The anti-trans activists created some problems for us, and we went through some ugly and hard times because of them. Not because of Sandy . . . It was horrible. It was ugly and destructive and mean-spirited and just stupid. How much easier it is to attack people close to you than to focus on the patriarchy! It was painful. It felt like everything we had done was invisible and irrelevant to those people. (Williams, 2016b)

Fearing for her safety, the safety of her fellow collective members, and the future of Olivia in the face of a threatened national TERF-led boycott, Stone left the collective. However, she went on to apply the radical-to-the-root feminist ethics she learned at Olivia to what became a foundational document for both trans feminism and transgender studies: 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto' (Stone, 1992).

Raymond's eventual influence was far more devastating than any violent movement to crush trans-inclusive radical feminist spaces. It was her work that helped to precipitate the end of both public and private insurance coverage of trans medical care (Williams, 2014a) during a period when employment discrimination against trans people was ruled legal (*Ulane v. Eastern Airlines*, 1984). If we are to place any level of confidence in research linking the lack of medical care to the high mortality rate of trans people (Zaker-Shahrak et al., 2012), we must concede that the medical system Raymond helped to pioneer resulted in unnecessary deaths.

1990s: MichFest and Camp Trans

As Raymond's policy work began to affect trans people's ability to access affirmative healthcare in the US, the woman-born woman dialectic gained increasing cultural currency. In 1991, Nancy Burkholder, a trans woman, was thrown out of MichFest. Until that point, few – including Burkholder – knew there was a no-trans policy in place. When she was ejected, cisgender lesbian feminist Janis Walworth began organizing a response that would later become known as Camp Trans.

Walworth organized a letter-writing campaign, contacted queer media outlets to get the word out about what had happened to Burkholder, and returned to MichFest in 1992 and 1993 with friends. She began distributing educational leaflets titled 'Gender Myths,' but was told by MichFest security that they should leave because they were in physical danger:

. . . the festival security stopped by and told us that the trans women in our group would have to leave, 'for their own safety.' Tensions were definitely rising, we were told. We had scheduled to do some workshops and some folks were definitely hostile. We were told that, for our own safety, the trans women would need to leave the festival as soon as possible. (Williams, 2016a)

While the MichFest Leather Dykes said they would provide bodyguard protection for Walworth's team, it was decided that avoiding violence was the best course of action.

Thus, an outside outreach camp was created in 1993, which later came to be called, 'Camp Trans'. As with Raymond's account of the threats against Olivia Records, much of this reality is erased from Sheila Jeffreys' historical account published in *Gender Hurts*:

[T]he siege of the festival began in 1993 when some transgender activists set up 'Camp Trans' opposite the entrance to the festival to protest the policy of not admitting self-identified transgenders. (Jeffreys, 2014, p. 167)

Gone is the reality that cisgender lesbian women began what became Camp Trans. Hidden is the threat of violence that made Camp Trans necessary as an outside entity, and gone are the brave Leather Dykes who offered to physically protect Camp Trans activists.

Also missing from Jeffreys' account is the fact that by the late 1990s, Camp Trans was largely facilitated by the Lesbian Avengers, and that, as part of the group's activities in 1999, a group of young Avengers bought a 16-year-old trans girl entry to MichFest from the festival ticket booth. The Lesbian Avengers explicitly stated that everyone in the group was from Camp Trans and some of their group was trans. Everyone in the group was sold tickets, but the moment they entered the gates, a group began trailing them shouting, 'MAN ON THE LAND!' This continued until MichFest security moved everyone to a tent where the young woman was made to stand in front of the group while TERFs spent the next two hours berating her. One adult even openly threatened her life. What follows are the Lesbian Avengers' accounts of this harrowing experience:

S. [Lesbian Avenger]:

About 10 TERFs were waiting for us when we came in. The whole 'MAN ON THE LAND!' started as soon as we walked in. I mean, at the time, we're kids, we're teenagers and these are all adults. . . . [I]t was just so fucked up. We were trying to give out t-shirts and stickers about being inclusive. But it was getting bad.

K. [trans girl in the Lesbian Avenger group]:

A huge crowd of yelling people formed around us and I started crying at that point. It got so loud that Nomy Lamm, who was performing there as part of Sister Spit, came over and stood up for us . . . The crowd and me were walked over to a tent area. . . . [T]here was a queue of people who were going to get to say whatever they wanted to say. I remember, specifically, one woman looking right at me and telling me that I needed to leave the Land as soon as possible because she had a knife and didn't know if she would be able to control herself if I was around her. . . . [A]s soon as one person stopped speaking, another would start, so nobody said or did anything about the death threat. . . . I was sobbing and [B] was holding my face close to hers, telling me that it would be over soon, but then I just checked out.

S: The moderator did nothing. It was just a mudslinging, hatred pouring out. It was just like one by one by one being like, ‘You’re a rapist! You’re raping the Land! You’re destroying womanhood! I don’t know what I’m going to do to you!’ – it was just violent, hatred, and I know that most of it was geared at [K]. I was up there being attacked, but I wasn’t getting the brunt of it. . . . At least 30 people were allowed to speak at us, but there were around 75 under the tent, and if you included the people around the tent who were watching and listening, well over 100. (Williams, 2014e)

In keeping with the decades-long tradition of erasing trans-inclusive radical feminists’ voices and experience, MichFest organizer Lisa Vogel (1999) addressed what occurred to K thusly:

A number of spontaneous gatherings developed where participants discussed and debated the presence of the Son of Camp Trans activists and their actions. Volunteer facilitators helped to structure discussions so that various viewpoints, including those of the Son of Camp Trans, could be heard.

Instead of an unruly mob that set upon itself the task of stalking, harassing, and ultimately threatening the life of a teenage trans girl, MichFest claimed that both sides of the debate could be heard. Erased too was the experience of the MichFest performer, Nomy Lamm, who used her own body to protect the trans youth:

I think I just felt really protective. I was like, ‘No way! Huh uh! You’re not gonna fuck with this brave [kid] who put herself on the frontlines here!’ I felt angry that people couldn’t see that this was a person, a vulnerable young person . . . I can’t imagine how traumatic that must have been for her.

When I was on stage I said, ‘I just want to say that including trans women in this space is not going to take anything away, it’s going to add to it. I’ve been in women-only spaces that include trans women and that’s been my experience.’ I was surprised that a bunch of people stood up and cheered. It made me feel hopeful. (Williams, 2014e)

Naming exclusion

When considering the practical effect of TERF ideology upon both trans and feminist communities, one must consider how much effort, time, and attention is wasted in acts of lateral violence. How many organizations were fundamentally disrupted or shuttered altogether? Where might trans and feminist communities be without the animus inflicted, for decades, upon these communities?

While TERF opinion leaders would have us believe that it is trans existence that is problematic, for both trans people and feminist spaces, the historical record reveals a very different story that is long overdue in the telling. It was for that very reason an online feminist space popularized the notion that inclusive radical feminists were

different from a group that called themselves radical feminist, but who primarily worked to attack the equal existence of trans people, especially in feminist spaces.

While TERFs frequently claim that trans people coined ‘TERF’ as a slur; a term that is ‘insulting, hyperbolic, misleading, and ultimately defamatory’ (Hungerford, 2013), the reality is that the acronym was popularized by cisgender feminists who were part of a radical feminist community. Viv Smythe, an early promoter of the term (Smythe, 2018), recounts how and why ‘TERF’ arose within feminist discourse in 2008:

[TERF] was not meant to be insulting. It was meant to be a deliberately technically neutral description of an activist grouping. . . . We wanted a way to distinguish TERFs from other radfems with whom we engaged who were trans*-positive/neutral, because we had several years of history of engaging productively/substantively with non-TERF radfems, and then suddenly TERF comments/posts seemed to be erupting in RadFem spaces where they threadjacked dozens of discussions, and there was a great deal of general frustration about that. It is possible that one of us picked it or something similar up from an IRC [internet relay chat] discussion elsewhere and then we both adopted/adapted it for ourselves, perhaps transforming it from some other initialism into an acronym, because we both appreciate the utility of acronyms in simplifying discourse . . . distinguishing between different arms of activism is what social activist movements do as they grow and develop and react to change within and without. (Williams, 2014c)

The emerging ability to describe a difference between TERFs and other radical feminists is a response to the decades-long appropriation of radical feminism itself by a group primarily concerned with the eradication of trans bodies within society. Even as traditional media platforms continue to conflate sex-essentialist activism with radical feminism (BBC, 2019), new media platforms routinely make this much needed distinction (Peltz, 2019). TERF, as an internet-born term, offers those concerned about the erasure of trans-inclusive radical feminist history the ability to concisely distinguish between radical feminists and sex-essentialist activists who claim their anti-trans activism represents radical feminism.

Whether we are speaking of heteronormative women excluding lesbian women for not being the right kind of woman, or TERFs excluding trans women for the same reason, these supposed strategies for women’s empowerment are both painful and toxic. The now decades-old sex-essentialist movement continues to justify itself through a morality it constructs with a rhetoric of denaturalization and dehumanization. This, in turn, justifies lateral violence against trans and feminist communities. The history recounted in this article reveals that such empowerment strategies are inherently disruptive and destructive to constituencies of women. TERF rhetoric, morality, and behaviors are, at their core, an attempt to exact a gain from another woman’s forced loss of both humanity and authenticity.

In 1977, Dworkin (1996, p. 60) called out what she termed an ‘ideological rot’ within a certain type of feminism:

. . . women have increasingly tried to transform the very ideology that has enslaved us into a dynamic, religious, psychologically compelling celebration of female biological potential. This attempted transformation may have survival value – that is, the worship of our procreative capacity as power may temporarily stay the male-supremacist hand that cradles the test tube. But the price we pay is that we become carriers of the disease we must cure.

In Dworkin's analysis, some women have toxic strategies for attempting to access empowerment. Her words are echoed by Catherine MacKinnon's radical feminist perspective:

My views on this have not changed one iota over time, although they have become more informed as more trans people have written, spoken out, and more discussion has been engaged, and as I have met more and more out trans people (mostly transwomen) all over the world. My basic feeling, with Simone de Beauvoir, is 'one is not born, one rather becomes a woman.' How one becomes a woman is not, I think, our job to police, even as everything about that process is worth inquiry and detailed understanding. (Williams, 2015b)

When one considers these analyses from some of the foundational radical feminist opinion leaders and organizations, we find a movement that in some significant ways begins to resemble the central analysis of what has become known as 'trans feminism.' It is difficult to read some of the most influential radical feminist thinkers and not notice how their ideas about a supposedly natural sexed body binary sound a lot like trans feminist critiques of body binaries.

Conclusion

TERF activism is founded upon a sex-essentialist ideology wherein 'woman' is reducible to any number of nature or God-given (non-cultural) essential biological attributes such as chromosomes, fecundity, and bone morphology. For TERFs, the presence or absence of these essential attributes defines one's material condition so that trans men are oppressed as women in society and trans women are not. When such an analytical framework is contrasted against the radical feminist analyses of thinkers such as Wittig and MacKinnon, the foundational differences between trans-exclusionary and trans-inclusive radical feminisms could not be more stark.

The complementary attributes of trans feminism and radical feminism are evidenced in decades of cooperation and community-building between cis and trans feminists. TERFs, aided by uninformed media platforms, have enjoyed the largely unquestioned position of representing 'radical feminist' and 'lesbian feminist' analysis within traditional news outlets. Therefore, TERF, as an addition to the feminist vocabulary, constructs a much-needed lexical firewall between a group primarily concerned with the eradication of trans bodies, and a group primarily concerned with the eradication of patriarchy.

It is the need to defend an ontological woman rooted in sex-essentialism that morally animates TERF rhetoric and behaviors. The fear that women are being 'erased' (O'Neil, 2018) provides an ethical lens through which serious and immediate action to police the category 'woman' becomes moral, leading TERFs to advocate against the Equality Act (The Heritage Foundation, 2019) and the Violence Against Women Act (House Judiciary, 116th Congress, 2019) in the US. It is through this lens that TERFs dehumanize trans people and it is through this process of dehumanization that aggressive action against the existence of trans bodies becomes a moral imperative.

While radical feminist, trans, and TERF approaches share foundational analyses regarding bodies and reproduction, TERF analysis diverges from radical and trans feminisms in that it often asserts that all aspects of gender are sexist and must therefore be

abolished. Leaving aside the particulars of how individuals might cease contextualizing and communicating their subjective experience of phenotype, TERFs objectify trans people as the embodiment of gender and therefore sexism itself. Instead of focusing on the systemic architecture of sexism within society, as radical and trans feminists do, TERFs primarily focus upon the eradication of that which they believe has come to embody all that is oppressive about patriarchal culture: trans people.

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1. It's worth noting that Córdova later self-identified as a 'trans-but'ch' lesbian (Córdova, 2011). The Lesbian Avengers interviewed requested that their identities be withheld because they feared how TERF activists might react to their history being disclosed.

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Author biography

Cristan Williams has founded numerous social service programs, community centers, and the Transgender Archive in Houston, Texas. She is the author of short stories, academic papers, and numerous longform articles. She has served on numerous public health boards, received numerous awards for her advocacy, and presented at universities throughout the US.