



Moving Beyond the “Trans Debates”:

An Ally’s Strategy for Transfeminist Engagements with Trans-Exclusionary Feminist Violence

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Abstract

Trans-exclusionary, sometimes termed “gender critical,” feminism has and continues to perpetuate and incite transphobic violence. Trans rights activists and scholars have long critically engaged with the logical fallacies, essentialisms, and controlling images asserted and constructed by trans-exclusionary feminists. Meanwhile, many cisgender feminists have remained trans-silent, complicit in the dehumanization of our trans siblings in these so-called “trans debates.” To disrupt such trans-silence, I discuss strategies of a trans-allied response to a case example describing Sandy Stone’s—a trans rights scholar and artist whose work is recognized as trailblazing the contemporary field of transgender studies—experience with trans-exclusionary feminist violence. By focusing on the concrete strategies of no-platforming and adoption of trans-inclusive community guidelines, I seek to outline a pathway of mobilization for cisgender feminists to cast off their trans-silence to adopt transfeminist practices firmly in coalition with the goals of trans rights activists and scholars.

Keywords

transgender, transphobia, transphobic violence, transfeminism, trans-rights, trans-exclusionary feminism, gender critical, epistemological violence, coalition, allyship, no-platforming, community guidelines

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Introduction

This decade has been characterized by a Western political backlash to the advancement of transgender rights (Barnett et al., 2018; Pearce et al., 2020). Amid this backlash, trans-exclusionary feminist authors—such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2017), Meghan Murphy (Feminist Current, 2020), Germaine Greer (The Update, 2015), and J.K. Rowling (2020)—and organizations—such as LGB Alliance (2020) and Contra El Borrado De Los Mujeres (2020)—have continued to utilize their platforms—as well as feminist theory and community resources—to perpetuate transphobia. This transphobia takes the form of perpetuating cis-hegemonic narratives and controlling images (Collins, 1990, p. 5) of

trans identity, which construct feminisms concerned only with the oppressions experienced by (some) cisgender women and—at its most dangerous—incite physical violence against trans people (Autostraddle, 2020; Camminga, 2020; Disclosure, 2020; Gaycation, 2016; Serano, 2013; Sullivan, 2006; Williams, 2014; Willis, 2017). Trans-rights activists—including trans feminists¹—have long borne the brunt of problematizing trans-exclusionary rhetoric (Serano, 2013). Meanwhile, many cisgender feminists have remained silently complicit in the dehumanization of our trans siblings (Unladylike, 2021).

Trans-silent feminists do not interrupt—with direct communication or scholarship—the trans-exclusionary feminist rhetoric which invalidates the lived experiences of trans people (Serano, 2018). This silence may be a result of trans-silent feminists seeking to avoid polarization within feminism, feeling unqualified to speak on trans rights, or—among other reasons—having internalized the notion that while trans identity is valid, trans rights are trans issues and cisgender women’s rights are feminist issues (Camminga, 2020; Collins, 1990, p. 6; Serano, 2017; Kendall, 2020, p. xv; Willis, 2017).

Regardless of the underlying reasons, trans-silent feminists’ failure to take a stance against feminist-perpetuated transphobia has lent unspoken legitimization to the questioning—and thus the invalidation—of trans realities in these so-called “trans debates” (Ahmed, 2003). When the existence of trans people and their welcomeness within feminist spaces are topics left open for debate, doubt is cast on the existence of transphobia (Koyama, 2020). This then plays into the arguments of transphobic pundits—“gender critical” or not—who assert that the heightened experiences of rape, homelessness, poverty, healthcare discrimination, and suicidality among trans people (Disclosure, 2020; Grant et al., 2011) is not a result of societally entrenched transphobia, but—according to Janice Raymond (1994)—a result of transgender community deviance or—according to Germaine Greer (BBC, 2015)—that ‘it is simply not true that intersexual [sic]² people suffer in a way that other people don’t suffer.’

To disrupt such trans-silence, I discuss strategies of trans-allied response—informed by the expert knowledges of trans rights activists—to a real-life case example of trans-exclusionary feminist violence. Rather than critically engaging with the specific logical fallacies posited and harms caused by trans-exclusionary arguments—an area of scholarship rigorously taken up by trans rights scholars and activists (Feinberg, 1996; Jacques, 2017; Koyama, 2020; Lavery, 2019; Mermaids, 2020; Pearce et al., 2020; Serano, 2013; Stone, 2006; Stryker, 2007)—this essay focuses on concrete strategies for cisgender feminists to support trans people, validate trans realities, and embolden transfeminist scholarship and activism within feminist spaces. Furthermore, drawing from Julia Serano’s (2017, par. 18) and Sandy Stone’s (Williams, 2014, par. 28-31) narratives of attempting to directly engage with trans-exclusionary feminists, I speak to trans-silent feminists—the moveable middle—rather than attempting to outline a strategy of

¹ The phrase “trans feminists” is used to refer to feminists who are transgender (Serano, 2012), while the term “transfeminist” is used in the title of this essay to refer to areas of feminist scholarship and activism that are informed on an epistemological level by the forms of intersectional and culturally situated oppressions historically experienced by transgender people (Stryker, 2007).

² In context, ‘intersexual’ is taken to refer to transgender people.

transformative engagement with individuals whose opposition to trans rights is rooted in essentialism or fear (Koyama, 2020). I seek to outline a pathway of mobilization for cisgender feminists to cast off their trans-silence in order to be trans-allied feminists whose activist practices are firmly in coalition with the goals of trans rights activists and scholars (Feinberg, 1992; Kendall, 2020, pp. 249-258).

Case Example: Sandy Stone's Experience with Trans-Exclusionary Feminist Violence

In an interview with *The Transadvocate*, Sandy Stone, a trans woman, explained that she joined Olivia Records—a feminist lesbian separatist music collective—after being recruited as a sound engineer (Williams, 2014). Stone described that Janice Raymond mailed Olivia excerpts of what would become the chapter 'Sapho by Surgery' in her 1979 *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1994, pp. 99-119). Raymond's chapter moved beyond her assertion that transgender women are 'deviant males' (pp. 183) who are extending their objectification of 'women in rape, pornography, and 'drag'' to 'the usurped female biology' (pp. 29), by describing lesbian trans women—who she refers to as 'transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists'—as dangerous interlopers in women's spaces (1994, p. 99). While the version of Raymond's excerpt received by Olivia did not name Stone specifically—as it would in its final publication (1994, pp. 101-103 and 201) —Stone explained that it was clearly intended to out her. After receiving Raymond's excerpt, Stone described Olivia receiving an avalanche of transphobic hate mail that ranged from criticizing the sound engineering of certain albums as masculine to directly threatening Stone's life. Other letters—referenced by Raymond (1994)—protested that 'Olivia did not inform women that Stone was a postoperative transsexual' (p. 201) and expressed: 'I feel raped when Olivia passes off Sandy, a transsexual, as a real woman' (p. 103). Stone described that the situation continued to escalate, with Olivia being informed that trans-exclusionary feminist groups planned to kill Stone, a threat that was materialized when such groups attended Olivia touring events and had their guns confiscated. Stone explained that after years of weathering such threats of violence—while continuing to serve as a sound engineer at Olivia—she decided to leave after the collective received an organized boycott threat.

The forms of trans-exclusionary feminist violence at issue in this case example consist of a trans-exclusionary feminist using her skills as a researcher to attempt to out a trans person, spread controlling images of trans women on a national scale, and to rally a feminist community response against a group that she feels is invading feminist spaces. Beyond the immediate effect of Raymond's trans-exclusionary organizing, are the echoes of transphobic violence—adopted by contemporary trans-exclusionary feminists like Rowling (2020); and Germaine Greer in *The Update* (2015)—incited by her book. According to trans rights scholars Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle: 'Raymond's *The Transsexual*

Empire did not invent anti-transsexual prejudice, but it did more to justify and perpetuate it than perhaps any other book ever written' (2006, p. 131). Thus, I focus on trans-allied response to individuals utilizing feminist community resources to disseminate trans-exclusionary rhetoric, and on undermining of transphobia within feminist communities largely.

No-Platforming

Recognizing Raymond's work as a transphobic manifesto around which other trans-exclusionary feminists have rallied, no-platforming her and those who sympathize with her stances on trans lives recognizes that such views are dangerous enough for us to refuse to amplify (Serano, 2017). This constitutes no-platforming on a public scale, where feminist organizations refuse to hire or publish feminists who utilize their talents to spread misinformation or controlling images about trans people. No-platforming does not indicate a refusal to acknowledge the continued expression of trans-exclusionary feminist ideology. According to Stryker and Whittle, to do so would render invisible an area of feminist rhetoric which actively harms trans communities, and would shut down any attempts to bring awareness to or halt the violence that this discourse has incited (Raymond, 2006, p. 131). Instead, no-platforming firmly indicates that the core arguments asserted by trans-exclusionary feminists are not valid (Serano, 2017); and should be invoked only when they are critically engaged with, when their impacts are discussed, or to draw a parallel between the historic oppression of trans communities and other marginalized groups for the purpose of coalition building (Collins, 1990; Kafer, 2013).

This practice is not a policy of punishing or censoring individuals who express ideas that transfeminist scholars and activists simply disagree with. It is a practice of what Serano terms 'refusing to tolerate intolerance,' where we as cisgender feminists take responsibility for the ideas that we use our resources to circulate, and in solidarity with our trans siblings do not disseminate scholarship which perpetuates transphobia (2017). Trans-exclusionary feminist rhetoric is not an example of a benign "diversity of ideas," and thus should not merit circulation.

Trans-Inclusive Community Guidelines

Aligning with the practical and symbolic de-legitimization of trans-exclusionary feminist ideologies is the adoption of trans-inclusive community guidelines within feminist spaces. While the form that trans-inclusive community guidelines take is specific to a given social-political context, such guidelines should establish that:

1. Transgender people are reliable sources concerning their gender identity (Minus 18, 2014).
2. Transphobia exists and continues to harm trans communities in intersectional ways (Mermaids, 2020).
3. The presence or existence of trans people as a group does not constitute a threat to cisgender people's safety (Disclosure, 2020; Feinberg, 1996).
4. Trans rights and transfeminist activism does not undermine movements to address cisgender women's rights (Serano, 2013 & 2018).

In practice, such guidelines construct—and in most cases, reconstruct—feminist spaces as communities capable of affirming trans people.

Practices such as sharing one's pronouns upon introduction and in an email signature—and utilizing a person's expressed pronouns—signals that a person recognizes that people are the gender that they understand themselves to be (Minus 18, 2014; TSER, 2015). Relatedly, describing feminist issues with trans-inclusive language—regardless of whether or not a trans person is present—allows activist responses to be open to serving trans people and benefiting from the works of trans feminist activists and scholars. For example, in the context of addressing oppression related to periods or menopause, using terms such as “menstruators,” “people who have uteruses,” and “those experiencing menopause”—rather than the sweeping term “women”—constructs such activism as capable of supporting all of those—including trans masculine people—who suffer at the hands of a cis-normative androcentric medical system (Feinberg, 2001; Serano, 2016).

The use of trans-inclusive language within feminist movements challenges trans-exclusionary mythology—like that asserted by Greer (Channel 4 News, 2018)—asserting that trans identity takes away resources from addressing the reproductive injustice experienced by cis women. When the existence of people who experience oppression related—but not identical—to that experienced by cisgender, white, and middle-class women is treated as a threat or distraction from the socio-political movement to address such oppression, those movements will only be invested in addressing the harms experienced by those who feel threatened (Kendall, 2020; Willis, 2017). Referring to oppression related to birth, when the existence of trans men is treated as a threat to movements which call for universal access to patient-centered and rigorously researched reproductive healthcare—or as a threat to motherhood largely—pregnant men are not able to benefit from the community resources offered within those activist spaces (Autostraddle, 2021). Similarly, when the existence of transgender women who experience misogyny similar—but not identical—to cisgender women, is treated as an inconvenience or distraction, those movements make flimsy claims of solidarity (Camminga, 2020; Kafer, 2013, pp. 152; Lorde, 1981; Serano, 2018).

Furthermore, the adoption of trans-inclusive community guidelines which recognize requests for feminist “safe spaces” free of trans people as a group to be rooted in transphobia helps to undermine the trans-exclusionary feminist myths such requests rest upon (Koyama, 2020; Serano, 2013). Such practices often aim to proscribe the presence of trans women specifically—and come in the form of creating “womyn born womyn” spaces banning all trans women (Hamilton, 2016, p. 122; Tea, 2018) or mandating “no penis policies” which only tolerate the presence of trans women who have had bottom-surgery (Koyama, 2020). Such requests may come from sincere places of fear held by cis women who have been raped by people with penises (Serano, 2013, p. 31). However, to conform to such policies pays credence to the logical fallacy that those assigned male at birth (AMAB) rape as an essential biological urge—doing no service for a survivor's healing—as well as legitimizes the transphobic myth that trans women who do not disclose that they are trans are guilty of ‘deception’ as wolves in sheep's clothing attempting to prey on cis women (Armchair Expert, 2021; Disclosure, 2020; Tea, 2018, p. 92). In the words of trans rights activist Leslie Feinberg (1996, p. 116):

As a rape survivor, I understand the need for safe space together—free from sexist harassment and potential violence. But

fear of gender variance also can't be allowed to deceptively cloak itself as a women's safety issue.

Drawing on this logic, the need for safe spaces may be satisfied by carving out trans-inclusive spaces for people who have faced common forms of oppression—such as rape survivor support groups. Simultaneously, such community guidelines must acknowledge the validity of different trans community's needs for spaces safe from transphobia—including trans-community only spaces (Serano, 2013, p. 33-34). While trans people as a group do not pose a threat to cisgender people, the same is not true for cis people, considering our historical and ongoing perpetration and complicity in transphobic violence (Feinberg, 1996, p. 117).

Conclusion

By adopting practices of no-platforming and guidelines of trans-inclusion, feminist organizing can be formulated from the outset in a manner that is in meaningful coalition with trans rights activism and scholarship—in other words, that is transfeminist (Stryker, 2007). Embodying transfeminist practices, cisgender feminists must move beyond a shallow disagreement with trans-exclusionary rhetoric. We must not fall into the trap of cisgender feminists disagreeing with trans-exclusionary assertions because—in certain spaces—it is not socially acceptable to be outrightly transphobic. This scenario, where people passively disagree with transphobic ideas, while also not understanding how such views harm trans communities, will not address the overarching issue of feminist perpetrated transphobia. With this lack of understanding, cisgender feminists take a self-congratulatory solace in not being deemed transphobic, while also not holding feminist practices which in any meaningful way problematize transphobia. So, we must ask ourselves, are we meaningfully challenging transphobia with our feminist practices? Or are we passively accepting or tolerating trans people, while also using none of our individual talents to undermine transphobia?

Whether this takes the form of learning from and citing transfeminist works that are relevant to our areas of feminist activism so that the voices of trans feminist activists and scholars are able to eclipse the controlling narratives asserted by trans-exclusionary feminists, or simply using the phrase “cis women” instead of “women” when referring to cis women, we as cisgender feminists must actively dismantle transphobia. We must break the norm of cis-dominated feminist spaces—and women's studies classrooms—only mentioning trans people as a token talking point during a theoretical discussion of the social construction of sex and gender, while not meaningfully engaging with transfeminist scholarship or welcoming trans feminist activists (Collins, 1990; Serano, 2013). We must halt our complicity in the loss of trans lives by deeply internalizing the *reality* that trans rights are feminist issues, and that there is no feminist issue that does not concern trans people.

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