

Radical Inclusion

Recounting the Trans Inclusive History of Radical Feminism

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Abstract This article reviews the ways in which radical feminism has been and continues to be trans inclusive. Trans inclusive radical feminist opinion leaders, groups, and events are reviewed and contrasted against a popular media narrative that asserts that radical feminism takes issue with trans people. Reviewed are historical instances in which radical feminists braved violence to ensure their feminism was trans inclusive.

Keywords feminism, radical feminism, TERF

In this article, I will review some of the ways in which the inclusion and support of trans people by radical feminists has been hidden from trans and feminist discourse, thereby creating the perception that radical feminism isn't supportive of trans people. John Stoltenberg, a radical feminist author and long-term partner of the pioneering radical feminist opinion leader Andrea Dworkin, wrote (pers. comm., February 13, 2015), "The notion that truly revolutionary radical feminism is trans-inclusive is a no brainer. I honestly do not understand how or why a strain of radical feminism has emerged that favors a biology-based/sex-essentialist theory of 'sex caste' over the theory of 'sex class' as set forth in the work of [Monique] Wittig, Andrea [Dworkin], and [Catharine] MacKinnon. Can radical feminism be 'reclaimed' so that its trans-inclusivity—which is inherent—is made apparent? I hope so." It is to this hope that I wish to draw attention to in this article.

To this end, I will utilize the feminist term *trans exclusionary radical feminist* (TERF) to distinguish the "biology-based/sex-essentialist" ideology Stoltenberg identified as being different from the analysis of the radical feminist opinion leaders he explicitly noted. In 2008, an online feminist community popularized TERF as a way of making a distinction between these two types of feminism. While this lexical distinction is useful, online TERF activists sometimes

assert this term to be a slur, since some Internet users have used it in derogatory ways. Internet conflicts aside, I use this term in a manner consistent with its widely known original context, as asserted by the progenitor of the term, cisgender feminist Viv Smythe (Williams 2014a): “It 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.”

Absent this distinction, much has been written of the various ways in which “radical feminism” is critical of the trans experience. It is commonplace to find popular media outlets assert that “radical feminists” take issue with trans people. The *Globe and Mail* asserted (Wente 2014), “In fact, the most bitter battle in the LGBT movement today is between radical feminists and the transgender movement.” The *New Yorker* recounted (Goldberg 2014) how a conference calling itself “Radfems Respond” was “going to try to explain why, at a time when transgender rights are ascendant, radical feminists insist on regarding transgender women as men, who should not be allowed to use women’s facilities, such as public rest rooms, or to participate in events organized exclusively for women.” The *National Post* said (Kay 2014) that radical feminism and Paul McHugh are of one mind when it comes to trans people: “True sex change is simply not possible; you end up as a ‘feminized man’ or a ‘masculinized woman.’ Which is exactly what the radical feminists believe.”

Lost in these popular representations of radical feminism is its long and courageous trans inclusive history. These narratives don’t tell us that Dworkin ensured that her 1980s-era prowoman legal activism was trans inclusive. Through these popular radfem vs. trans narratives, we also lose the reality that the sound of the 1970s-era women’s music movement was engineered by an out trans woman because Olivia Records, the radical feminist lesbian separatist music collective, was itself trans inclusive, and we certainly don’t hear that Olivia paid for trans medical care. Olivia, born out of the radical feminist lesbian collective The Furies, went on to become a “hugely successful recording company, marketing radical lesbian recordings and performances that soon defined the ‘women’s music’ movement” (Morris 2015: 290).

When promoting the idea that TERF activism is radical feminism itself, it becomes difficult to clearly see the courage of the women of Olivia who endured months of threats of boycott and violence from TERF activists who demanded that the collective become trans exclusionary (Williams 2014b). When an armed group of TERF activists showed up at an Olivia show to murder out-trans woman and Olivia member Sandy Stone, it’s important to note that this group’s ideology was different from the radical feminism of Olivia. According to Stone, the threats

of death and violence became common. “We were getting hate mail about me. . . . The death threats were directed at me, but there were violent consequences proposed for the Collective if they didn’t get rid of me.” Olivia and Stone were informed that a TERF group named The Gorgons asserted that they would murder Stone if Olivia’s show came to Seattle. Stone said that the Olivia show was “probably the only women’s music tour that was ever done with serious muscle security.” Making good on their threats, armed Gorgons came to the show but were disarmed by Olivia security. Stone said, “In fact, Gorgons did come and they did have guns taken away from them. 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” (Williams 2014b).

Similarly, we need to acknowledge that there was an ideological difference between the radical feminism promoted at the largest lesbian gathering to date (Stryker 2008: 104)—the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference (WCLC)—and that of a group of TERF activists who attempted to rush the conference stage and bash out-trans woman and conference co-organizer Beth Elliott. When the radical feminists of WCLC stood in the way of the violent TERF activists—physically protecting a WCLC trans woman—and TERFs turned on those brave radical feminists and physically beat them instead, what does it say about the historical foundation of a contemporary TERF movement that consistently represents itself as radical feminism to the media? Robin Tyler, an early radical, feminist, lesbian women’s music producer, was one of the women who protected Elliott from assault. “We defended Beth Elliott. Robin Morgan came up with this horrible speech and when Beth went on stage to play her guitar and sing, [TERFs] started threatening her. Patty [Harrison] and I jumped on stage and we got hit, because they came onto the stage to physically beat her” (Williams 2014c).

The obfuscation of the trans inclusive nature of radical feminism was apparent when TERF activist Sheila Jeffreys spoke at the Andrea Dworkin Commemorative Conference. While she credited Dworkin as being her inspiration and spoke at length about Dworkin’s pioneering book, *Woman Hating*, she also denigrated the bodies of trans women and asserted trans medical care to be unnecessary. During her entire presentation, Jeffreys never once noted that—in the very book Jeffreys cited as being the inspiration for her activism—Dworkin advocated that trans people be given free access to trans medical care or that Dworkin viewed gender identity research as being subversive to patriarchy. Dworkin wrote (1974: 175), “Work with transsexuals, and studies of formation of gender identity in children provide basic information which challenges the notion that there are two discrete biological sexes. That information threatens to transform the traditional

biology of sex difference into the radical biology of sex similarity.” She went on to write, “Every transsexual is entitled to a sex-change operation, and it should be provided by the community as one of its functions” (186).

When confronted with the sex essentialism of TERF activists, pioneering radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon wrote (Williams 2015), “Male dominant society has defined women as a discrete biological group forever. If this was going to produce liberation, we’d be free. . . . To me, women is a political group. I never had much occasion to say that, or work with it, until the last few years when there has been a lot of discussion about whether transwomen are women.” Moreover, MacKinnon said (*On Century Avenue* 2015), “I always thought I don’t care how someone becomes a woman or a man; it does not matter to me. It is just part of their specificity, their uniqueness, like everyone else’s. Anybody who identifies as a woman, wants to be a woman, is going around being a woman, as far as I’m concerned, is a woman.” Stoltenberg echoed MacKinnon, saying, “Whatever individual trans folks’ political views, their existence is threatening the conservatism of sex essentialism across a broad spectrum of sex-and-gender fundamentalists. And in this respect, I believe, trans folks are on today’s front lines” (pers. comm., March 14, 2015).

It is my opinion that something intrinsic to radical feminism is lost when we characterize “radical feminism” as being locked in a bitter battle against trans people. Such assertions hide an exceptionally courageous history of radical trans inclusion. Moreover, conflating TERF ideology with radical feminism erases the voices of numerous radical feminist opinion leaders. Worse, when we fail to notice the voices of radical feminists who’ve stood by the trans community, we participate in diminishing the very feminism that braved violence and possible death to ensure that all women—even trans women—were included in their work toward the liberation of women.

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