

Whose feminism is it anyway? The unspoken racism of the trans inclusion debate

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Emi Koyama**

Independent scholar, USA

Abstract

This essay was first published on Emi Koyama's website eminism.org in 2000. Koyama examines how constructs of universal womanhood have operated to exclude many from feminist spaces. Much of the language surrounding trans identities and bodies has changed in the 20 years since its authorship. Yet, the central tensions, illustrated through a critical account of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's trans-exclusion policy, remain. Koyama's powerful argument that 'no-penis' policies are inherently racist and classist continues to offer an important challenge to white feminists, be they trans or cis.

Keywords

classism, feminism politics, Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, racism, trans inclusion

I

I have never been interested in getting myself into the mud wrestling of the whole 'Michigan' situation (i.e. the debate over the inclusion of trans people in Michigan Womyn's Music Festival). But I have become increasingly alarmed in the recent months by the pattern of 'debate' between white middle-class women who run 'women's communities' and white middle-class trans activists who run the trans movement. It is about time someone challenged the unspoken racism, which this whole discourse is founded upon.

The controversy publicly erupted in 1991, when organizers of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival expelled a transsexual woman from the campground, or 'The Land,' announcing that the festival is open only to 'womyn-born-womyn.' Next year, a small group of transsexual activists gathered in front of the Festival entrance to protest the policy. According to Davina Anne Gabriel, then the editor of *TransSisters: the Journal of Transsexual Feminism*, the 'stated intent [of the protest] from the very beginning was to

Corresponding author:

Emi Koyama.

Email: emi@eminism.org

persuade the organizers to change the festival policy to allow postoperative – but not preoperative – male-to-female transsexuals to attend.’¹ Based on the survey Gabriel and others conducted in 1992, they argued that a majority of festival participants would support such a policy change, while the same majority would oppose inclusion of ‘pre-operative’ transsexual women.²

If that was the case in 1992, the debate certainly expanded by 1994, when the protest came to be known as ‘Camp Trans.’ ‘In the first Camp Trans, the argument wasn’t just between us and the festival telling us we weren’t really women. It was also between the post-ops in camp telling the pre-ops they weren’t real women!’ says Riki Anne Wilchins, the executive director of GenderPAC. According to an interview, Wilchins advocates the inclusion of ‘anyone who lives, or has lived, their normal daily life as a woman’ including FtM trans people and many ‘pre-operative’ transsexual women.³ Or, as Gabriel alleged, Wilchins made a ‘concerted effort’ to ‘put herself in charge’ of the protest and to ‘force us [“post-operative” transsexual women] to advocate for the admission of preoperative MtF transsexuals.’ Gabriel reported that she ‘dropped out of all involvement in the “transgender movement” in disgust’ as she felt it was taking the ‘hostile and belligerent direction,’ as symbolized by Wilchins.⁴

For several years since its founding in 1994, GenderPAC and its executive director Wilchins were the dominant voice within the trans movement. ‘Diverse and feuding factions of the transgender community were brought together and disagreements set aside for the common good,’ JoAnn Roberts describes of the formation of the organization. But like Gabriel, many initial supporters of GenderPAC became critical of it as Wilchins shifted its focus from advocating for rights of transgender people to fighting all oppressions based on genders including sexism and heterosexism. Dissenters founded alternative political organizations specifically working for trans people’s rights.⁵

Similarly, five transsexual women including Gabriel released a joint statement just a few days before the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival 2000 criticizing both festival organizers and Wilchins as ‘untenable, anti-feminist, and ultimately oppressive of women, both transsexual and non-transsexual.’ Wilchins’ tactics were too adversarial, confrontational and disrespectful to women, they argued. Non-transsexual and ‘post-op’ transsexual women alike ‘deserve the opportunity to gather together in a safe space, free of male genitals,’ because ‘male genitals can be so emblematic of male power and sexual dominance that their presence at a festival . . . is inappropriate.’ They further stated that ‘people with male genitals who enter the festival risk offending and oppressing other attendees’ (Elliot et al., 2000).

‘We acknowledge that a post-op/no-penis policy is not perfect,’ admitted the writers of the statement. ‘This policy cannot address issues of race and class: specifically, the exclusion of women, especially women of colour, who are not able to afford sex reassignment surgery.’ But it nonetheless is ‘the best and fairest policy possible,’ they argue, because it ‘balances inclusion of transsexual women with legitimate concerns for the integrity of women’s culture and safe women’s space’ (Elliot et al., 2000). Their pretence of being concerned about racism and classism betrays itself when they used it as a preemptive shield against criticisms they knew they would encounter.

As for the gender liberation philosophy of Wilchins, they stated that they agreed with her position that ‘freedom of gender expression for all people is important.’ Yet,

‘as feminists,’ they ‘resent anyone attempting to co-opt’ the ‘love and creativity of the sisterhood of women’ for ‘a competing purpose’ such as Wilchins’ (Elliot et al., 2000). The pattern is clear: when they say ‘feminism’ and ‘sisterhood,’ it requires that anything other than ‘the celebration of femaleness’ – i.e. racial equality, economic justice and freedom of gender expression – to be set aside.

Jessica Xavier, one of the statement signatories, once wrote: ‘We too want the safe space to process and to heal our own hurting. We too want to seek solace in the arms of our other sisters, and to celebrate women’s culture and women’s music with other festi-goers’ (Xavier, 1999). Has it never occurred to her that her working-class and/or non-white ‘sisters’ might need (and deserve) such ‘space’ at least as much as she does?

II

While it was Maxine Feldman who performed openly as a radical lesbian feminist musician for the first time, it was the success of Alix Dobkin’s 1973 album *Lavender Jane Loves Women* that proved that there ‘was a wide audience for such entertainment’ and helped launch the unique culture of ‘women’s music’ (Faderman, 1991). ‘My music comes from and belongs to women experiencing women. So does my life . . . Long live Dyke Nation! Power to the women!’ declared Dobkin in the cover of her debut album.⁶

The history of the trans inclusion/exclusion debate within women’s music culture is almost as old as the history of the women’s music culture itself. Olivia Records, the ‘leader in women’s music,’ was founded in 1973, which stimulated the nationwide proliferation of highly political large annual women’s music festivals, modelled after the hippie be-ins of the 1960s (Faderman, 1991). It was only three years later that they came under heavy attack for refusing to fire the recording engineer who was found to be a male-to-female transsexual lesbian. The series of ‘hate mail, threats of assault, and death threats’ intensified especially after the publication in 1979 of Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which described the engineer as a dominating man, eventually forcing her to leave the collective (Califia, 1997).

Feminist resistances to the inclusion of transsexual women in the women-only space are, on the surface, rationalized on the basis that transsexual women are fundamentally different from all other women due to the fact they were raised with male privilege. Because of their past as boys or men, they are viewed as a liability for the physical and emotional safety for other women. When radical feminism viewed sexual violence against women not as isolated acts by a small number of criminals, but as a social enforcer of male dominance and heteronormativity, a woman’s concern for her safety became almost unquestionable (Brownmiller, 1975). The effectiveness of Raymond’s malicious argument that ‘all transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact’ was no surprise, given the context of the building momentum for the feminist holy war against violence against women (Raymond, 1979, p. 104).

Defenders of the ‘womyn-born-womyn’ policy argue that transsexual women who truly value the women’s movement and culture should respect the festival policies by refraining from entering the Land. ‘Just as many Womyn of Colour express the need for “room to breathe” they gain in Womyn-of-Colour space away from the racism that inevitably appears in interactions with a white majority, womyn born womyn still need and

value that same “room to breathe”,’ argued Lisa Vogel, the owner of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival.⁷ This exact pattern of argument is extremely common in lesbian and/or feminist publications – complete with the comment about how much they respect women of colour space and how transsexual women should do the same for ‘womyn-born-womyn.’ ‘I’ve spent years educating other white festigoers about honouring the workshops and spaces that are planned for women of colour only . . . It grieves me to see “progressive” folks attacking an event that is sacred for women-born-women,’ wrote a reader of *Lesbian Connection*, for example.⁸

However, another reader of *Lesbian Connection* disagrees with this logic: ‘If women born with vaginas need their space, why can’t Michigan provide “women-born-women” only space the way they provide women-of-colour only space’ instead of excluding transsexual women from the entire festival?⁹ Logically, it would not make any sense to exclude an entire subgroup of women from a women’s festival unless, of course, the organizers are willing to state on the record that transsexual women are not women.

Another flaw of the ‘respect’ argument is that ‘women of colour only’ spaces generally welcome women of colour who happen to have skins that are pale enough to pass as white. If the inclusion of pale-skinned ‘women of colour’ who have a limited access to white privilege is not questioned, why should women who may have passed as boys or men?

Radical feminism, in its simplest form, believes that women’s oppression is the most pervasive, extreme and fundamental of all social inequalities regardless of race, class, nationality, and other factors (Crow, 2000). It is only under this assumption that the privilege transsexual women are perceived to have (i.e. male privilege) can be viewed as far more dangerous to others than any other privileges (i.e. being white, middle-class, etc.)

But such ranking of oppressions and simplistic identity politics is inherently oppressive to people who are marginalized due to multiple identities (e.g. women of colour) or creolized identities (e.g. mixed-race people). Cherríe Moraga wrote: ‘In this country, lesbianism is a poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression’ (Moraga, 1981). Susan Brownmiller’s failure to acknowledge how rape charges are historically used as a political weapon against the black communities and Andrea Dworkin’s uncritical acceptance of the popular stereotypes about Hispanic communities being characterized by ‘the cult of machismo’ and ‘gang warfare’ illustrate this danger well (Eisenstein, 1983).

Combahee River Collective, the collective of Black lesbians, discussed the problem with the feminist identity politics in its famous 1977 statement. They wrote ‘Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand . . . We reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us’ (Combahee River Collective, 1977). It is not simply that white radical feminists happened to be racist; rather, the series of assumptions behind radical lesbian feminism (e.g. women’s oppression is the most pervasive and fundamental) was faulty as it privileged ‘those for whom that position is the primary or only marked identity’ (Duggan, 1995, p. 184).

Decades of protests by women of colour failed to educate those who have vested interest in maintaining this racist feminist arrogance. Here is an example: Alix Dobkin wrote in 1998 'fresh scare tactics were essential to turn a generation of "Lesbians" and "Dykes" against each other . . . when that failed to wipe us out, they tried "racist"' (Dobkin, 1998).

In other words, Dobkin attributed the accusation of racism to the patriarchy's attempt to 'wipe' lesbians out and *not* to the legitimate concerns of women of colour, effectively accusing these women of colour of conspiring with the patriarchy. 'What is the theory behind racist feminism?' asked Audre Lorde (Lorde, 1984b, p. 112). She argued, 'many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences' because 'to allow women of Colour to step out of stereotypes . . . threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex' (Lorde, 1984c, p. 118).

III

I used to think that feminists' reluctance to accepting transsexual women was arising from their constant need to defend feminism against the patriarchy as well as from the plain old fear of the unknown. I confess that I have given transphobic feminists far greater benefit of the doubt than I would to any other group of people exercising oppressive and exclusionary behaviours, and I regret that my inaction and silent complacency contributed to the maintenance of the culture that is hostile to transsexual people.

This realization came to me, ironically, during a panel presentation in spring 2000 by Alix Dobkin and several other lesbian-feminists about sharing 'herstory' of lesbian feminism. The room was packed with women in their 40s and up, and nearly all of them appeared white and middle-class. I was already feeling intimidated by the time the presentation began because everyone seemed to know everyone else except for me, but my level of fear and frustration kept piling up as the evening progressed.

The presentation was all about how great the women's community was back in the 70s, when it was free from all those pesky transsexuals, S/M practitioners and sex radicals (or so they think). I heard the room full of white women applauding in agreement with the comment that 'everyone trusted each other' and 'felt so safe regardless of race,' clearly talking about how she as a white woman did not feel threatened by the presence of women of colour, and it nauseated me. Another woman talked about how great it was that a private women's bar she used to hang out at had a long stairway before the door to keep an eye on potential intruders, and I felt very excluded myself because of my disability. I had never felt so isolated and powerless in a feminist or lesbian gathering before.

The highlight was when the sole Black woman stood up and said that she felt like an outsider within the lesbian-feminist movement. The whole room went silent, as if they were waiting for this uncomfortable moment to simply pass without anyone having to take responsibility. Feeling the awkward pressure, the Black woman added 'but it was lesbians who kept the American discussions on racism and classism alive,' which subsequently was met with a huge applaud from the white women. I kept wanting to scream 'It was lesbians of colour and working class lesbians who kept them alive, and you white middle-class lesbians had less than nothing to do with it,' but I did not have the courage to do so and it deeply frustrated me.¹⁰

Obviously, many lesbian-feminists – the same people who continue to resist transsexual people's inclusion in 'women's' communities – have not learned anything from the vast contributions of women of colour, working class women, women with disabilities, etc. even though they had plenty of opportunities to do so in the past few decades. It is not that there was not enough information about women of colour; they simply did not care that they are acting out racism, because they have vested interest in maintaining such a dynamic. The racist feminist that Audre Lorde so eloquently denounced is still alive.

I no longer feel that continued education about trans issues within women's communities would change their oppressive behaviours in any significant degree, unless they are actually willing to change. It is not the lack of knowledge or information that keeps oppression going; it is the lack of feminist compassion, conscience and principle that is.

Speaking from the perspective and the tradition of lesbians of colour, most if not all rationales for excluding transsexual women is not only transphobic, but also racist. To argue that transsexual women should not enter the Land because their experiences are different would have to assume that all other women's experiences are the same, and this is a racist assumption. Even the argument that transsexual women have experienced some degree of male privilege should not bar them from our communities once we realize that not all women are equally privileged or oppressed. To suggest that the safety of the Land would be compromised overlooks, perhaps intentionally, ways in which women can act out violence and discrimination against each other. Even the argument that 'the presence of a penis would trigger the women' is flawed because it neglects the fact that white skin is just as much a reminder of violence as a penis. The racist history of lesbian-feminism has taught us that any white woman making these excuses for one oppression have made and will make the same excuse for other oppressions such as racism, classism, and ableism.

IV

As discussed earlier, many lesbian-feminists are eager to brag how much respect they have toward the needs of women of colour to hold 'women of colour only' spaces. But having a respect for such a space is very different from having a commitment to anti-racism. The former allows white women to displace the responsibility to fight racism onto women of colour, while the latter forces them to confront their own privileges and racist imprinting.

Do white feminists really understand why women of colour need their own space? They claim they do, but judging from the scarcity of good literature written by white feminists on racism, I have to wonder. 'It was obvious that you were dealing with non-european women, but only as victims' of the patriarchy, wrote Audre Lorde in her famous letter to Mary Daly. White women's writings about women of colour frequently lose 'sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy' and 'how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other' (Lorde, 1984a, p. 69). White feminists often happily acknowledge ways in which white men's racism hurt women of colour (through poverty, prostitution, pornography, etc.) to pretend that they are advocates of women of colour, but often use it to absolve their own responsibility for racism. It is, then, no wonder that those who claim to 'respect' the space for women of colour simultaneously

employ racist rhetoric against transsexual people without having to face their own contradictions.

Similarly, the transsexual women who wrote the 'statement' did not see any contradiction in expressing concerns about racism and classism in one sentence and endorsing the racist and classist resolution in the next. Like white middle-class feminists, these transsexual women felt perfectly justified to absolve their responsibility to confront racism and classism and then call it feminist.

To make things more complicated, some trans activists who are politically more savvy support a 'womyn-born-womyn' policy or at least accept it as an acceptable feminist position. Kate Bornstein, for example, 'encourages everyone to engage in mutually respectful dialogue, without specifying what outcome might be desirable or possible,' because 'exclusion by lesbian separatists' cannot be considered oppressive when lesbians do not have very much 'economic and social resources' (Bornstein, 1994, p. 83). Another transsexual woman, in a private conversation, told me that she would rather be excluded from the Land altogether than risk the possibility of a male entry under the pretence of being transsexual. While I appreciate their supposedly feminist good intentions, I must remind them that their arguments support and reinforce the environment in which white middle-class women's oppression against women of colour and working class women are trivialized or tolerated. I must remind them it is never feminist when some women are silenced and sacrificed to make room for the more privileged women.

V

White middle-class transsexual activists are spending so much of their energy trying to convince white middle-class lesbians that they are just like other women, and thus are not a danger to other women on the Land. 'We are your sisters,' is their typical plea. Supporters of transsexual women repeat this same sentiment: 'As a lesbian who has interacted with the local trans community, I can assure you that womyn-born-womyn have nothing to fear from MtF transsexuals,' wrote one woman.¹¹ But it is time that we stop pretending that transsexual women are 'just like' other women or that their open inclusion will not threaten anybody or anything. The very existence of transsexual people, whether or not they are politically inclined, is highly threatening in a world that essentializes, polarizes and dichotomizes genders, and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and lesbian-feminism are not immune from it.

The kind of threat I am talking about is obviously not physical, but social, political, and psychological. It is the same kind of threat bisexual and pansexual politics present to gay identity politics and mixed-race people present to Black Nationalism. Much has been written about the transformative potential of transsexual existence – how it destabilizes the essentialist definitions of gender and exposes the constructedness of essentialism.¹²

In the 'women's communities,' transsexual existence is particularly threatening to white middle-class lesbian-feminists because it exposes the unreliableness of the body as a source of their identities and politics, and the fallacy of women's universal experiences and oppressions. These valid criticisms against feminist identity politics have been made by women of colour and working class women all along, and white middle-class women have traditionally dismissed them by arguing that they are patriarchal attempts to

trivialize women's oppression and bring down feminism as Dobkin did. The question of transsexual inclusion has pushed them to the position of having to defend the reliability of such absurd body elements as chromosomes as the source of political affiliation as well as the universal differences between transsexual women and non-transsexual women, a nonsensical position fraught with many bizarre contradictions.

It is my guess that transsexual women know this intrinsically, and that is why they feel it is necessary to repeatedly stress how non-threatening they really are. By pretending that they are 'just like' other women, however, they are leaving intact the flawed and unspoken lesbian-feminist assumption that *continuation of struggle against sexism requires silent compliance with all other oppressions*.

Like Gloria Anzaldúa's 'New Mestiza,' transsexual people occupy the borderland where notions of masculinity and femininity collide. 'It is not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions.' But speaking from the borderland, from its unique 'shifting and multiple identity and integrity,' is where transsexual activists can find the most authentic strength.

The borderland analogy is not meant to suggest that transsexual people are somewhere between male and female. Rather, the space they occupy is naturally and rightfully theirs, as the actual Texas–Mexico borderlands belong to Chicano/as, and I am calling attention to the unnaturalness of the boundary that was designed to keep them out. 'A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary,' Anzaldúa wrote, 'it is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants' (Anzaldúa, 1987). The fact that many transsexual women have experienced some form of male privilege is not a burden to their feminist consciousness and credibility, but an asset – that is, provided they have the integrity and conscience to recognize and confront this and other privileges they may have received.

In her piece about racism and feminist identity politics, Elliott Femyne bat Tzedek discusses how threatening boundary-crossings are to those in the position of power and privilege. 'Think about the phrase . . . "You people make me sick." Think of how the person screaming this phrase may commit physical violence against what so disturbs him/her . . . those in power do actually feel sick, feel their lives being threatened . . . Men protecting male power have a much clearer view than Feminists do of exactly how threatening crossing gender is' (bat Tzedek, 1999).¹³

By the same token, feminists who are vehemently anti-transsexual have a much better understanding of how threatening transsexual existence is to their flawed ideology than do transsexuals themselves. The power is in consciously recognizing this unique positionality and making connections to the contributions of women of colour and other groups of women who have been marginalized within the feminist movement. With this approach, I am confident that transsexual women, along with all other women who live complex lives, will be able to advance the feminist discussions about power, privilege and oppression.

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Notes

1. Davina Anne Gabriel, from an open letter to *Lesbian Connection* dated 27 January 2000. Distributed online.
2. Phrases ‘pre-operative’ and ‘post-operative’ are put inside quotation marks (except where it is part of someone else’s quote) because it is my belief that such distinction is irrelevant, classist and MtF-centric (i.e. disregards experiences of FtM trans people). I believe that such over-emphasis on genital shape is deeply oppressive to trans people and contributes to the suppression and erasure of intersex people.
3. *InYourFace* interview of Riki Anne Wilchins. Distributed as a press release from GenderPAC on 18 August 1999.
4. Gabriel, from the open letter.
5. JoAnn Roberts, ‘The Next Wave: Post-Reform Transgender Activism’ (2000), distributed online.
6. *Lavender Jane Loves Women* (1973), as reprinted in the re-mastered CD edition.
7. Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival press release on 24 August 1999.
8. From *Lesbian Connection*, Jan./Feb. issue, 2000.
9. Ibid.
10. These comments were made at a ‘herstory sharing session’ hosted by Lesbian Community Project in Portland, Oregon, in early May.
11. From *Lesbian Connection*.
12. For example, see Garber, M. (1993). Spare parts: The surgical construction of gender. In H. Abelow, M. A. Barale, & D. M. Halperin (Eds.), *The lesbian and gay studies reader* (pp. 321–336). Routledge.
13. Personally, I was surprised to find this article in a radical feminist publication, especially since the same issue of *Rain and Thunder* also published a very hurtful column by Alix Dobkin that appears to endorse violence against transsexual women in women’s restrooms.

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Author biography

Emi Koyama is a multi-issue social justice activist and writer synthesizing feminist, Asian, survivor, dyke, queer, sex worker, intersex, genderqueer, and crip politics, as these factors, while not a complete descriptor of who she is, all impacted her life. Emi is putting the emi back in feminism at www.eminism.org.