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Transgender and Feminist Alliances in Contemporary U.K. Feminist Politics

Deborah M. Withers

Since 2007 the U.K. feminist activist community has been fervently engaging with the relationship between transgender politics and feminism. In this short article, I will report on the development of these debates within different feminist spaces that engage online and offline communities. In the process, I will reflect on the possibilities that concepts generated through the debates, such as the notion of “polytrans”-friendly space, can offer for a feminism that continues to grapple with transgender.

The discussions that emerged in recent U.K. feminist politics can be seen as a continuation of unresolved issues that have been manifest in activist and scholarly feminist communities since the late 1970s. Texts such as Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979) were responsible for creating the argument that male-to-female transsexuals are part of a plot by men to infiltrate the women’s movement, because “all transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact, appropriating this body for themselves.” Writers such as Sheila Jeffreys and Germaine Greer continued to disseminate such transphobic views into the 2000s and still have influence over contemporary feminist activist scenes in the United Kingdom. Others have challenged such positions. The 1996 *Lesbians Talk Transgender* by Zachary L. Nataf collected varied, and sometimes conflicting, voices. These range from the persisting skepticism of lesbian feminists about people transitioning from male to female, to the personal testimony of transgendered people. Ensuing debates have focused on the relationship of body modification and surgery to gendered

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identities, the creation of safe political spaces for women, and the problem of gendered privilege.¹

The question of transgender and feminism, as it (re)emerged in feminist networks in the United Kingdom in recent years, is primarily focused on who is allowed into, and who is able to define, feminism and feminist space. By “feminist space” I mean both the actual physical space in which feminists gather to undertake collective planning and action toward shared goals and online communities—blogs, Web sites, and e-lists—where much feminist activism happens in contemporary networks. Since the year 2000, new feminist cultural spaces, influenced by Riot Grrrl, queer feminism, and the spread of Ladyfest networks, have provided a crucial arena to support transgendered artists in whatever gender they chose to self-define. Performers such as Rae Spoon and Truly Kaput reconfigure femininity and masculinity through the singularity of their powerful voices and in turn open up room for their audiences to think in multiple genders.

Alongside these forms of queer, trans-positive feminism, there has been a resurgence of feminist activist positions originating in the women’s liberation movement decades earlier. Self-identified radical feminist groups, such as the London Feminist Network that re-instigated annual women-only Reclaim the Night Marches in 2004 and Million Women Rise that organizes women-only marches on International Women’s Day to protest violence against women, are the most visible (although the mainstream media continue to radically underreport the majority of feminist actions from whatever position they are coming).² Although none of these groups are, strictly speaking separatist—they do welcome the initiatives of profeminist men—the underlying assumption of their feminism is that the feminist subject is female. A logical development from this position is that feminism *belongs* in the first place to biological or what some critics have called cisgendered women—women whose gender identity is formed by a “match between your biological sex and your subconscious sex.”³

Much of the conflict over the transgender issue is framed as a generational one between Second Wave and Third Wave feminists. However, this analysis greatly reduces the complex positionality that feminists of different generations in the United Kingdom occupy. In order to address this

supposed generational conflict, I was part of setting up a network of activists called the Feminist Activist Forum in 2007-2008.⁴ This project sought to create intergenerational alliances among feminists; recover suppressed activist histories, beginning with the women's liberation movement; and relate them to current struggles. Our intention was to not reinvent the wheel (again). We were also keen to document our actions and tell the history of the present as we noticed that our diverse activism were being ignored or misrepresented by the media and in academia. We actively sought to make connections with older feminists and create a forum where feminists who disagreed with each other could do so in a productive, coalition-building way.

Discussions around the issue of transgender, feminism, and their alliances in the United Kingdom intensified in response to direct need: 2008 in particular saw a new visibility of feminist networks throughout Britain. Significant sites where activists negotiated the politics of feminism, transgender, and their alliances included projects such as Wominspace, a squat-tered womyn-only (note the "y") project that occupied a building in Hackney, London, from February 2008 to May 2008, and high-profile marches such as Million Women Rise.⁵ The popular feminist Internet site, The F Word (which plays upon the notoriety of the words *feminism/fuck*), also provided a significant forum for feminist debates about transgender issues. Both Wominspace and Million Women Rise defined themselves as "women-only spaces." The F-Word, a public Internet site, has been accessible to people of all genders.

Typically, women-only spaces function to create a safe space for women to come together, share experiences, and build confidence away from male-dominated culture and space, which they see as structured by male interests. Women-only spaces are common in histories of feminism, in particular in the women's liberation movement in the United Kingdom, which used women-only space as a strategy to challenge the male domination of radical leftist politics. Common women-only events that took place at the Wominspace in 2008 were women's health weekends, practical skill-sharing (such as plumbing or electrical work, occupations that are still male dominated), and women-focused spiritual rituals. Such events center on experiences that are particular to women as a

group, such as common health issues, or seek to empower women to challenge the power imbalances and their basic lack of access to modes of employment traditionally defined as male. The Million Women Rise and Reclaim the Night marches both seek to reclaim public space as a safe space for women.

Although there was broad agreement that the persistence of gender inequality and sexism in the United Kingdom makes women-only spaces and initiatives justifiable, what women-only space meant remained unclear. Were transwomen *really* welcome in these spaces when biological women were still calling these women “brother”? What about transmen? After much discussion, the Wominspace squat in London was declared in April 2008 a polytrans-friendly space.

A polytrans space is more inclusive in scope than a women-only space because it accounts for various modes of gendered experience. It is inclusive of people who may no longer identify as women to participate and benefit from safe spaces if they see themselves as continuing to have links to the women’s community. A transman, for example, who may or may not be undergoing a full transition, could also benefit from women’s health workshops and the safe spaces they engender away from normative medical assumptions. Polytrans-friendly spaces potentially account for past experiences and present self-identifications of the people who enter them and implicitly endorse an understanding of gender as multiple and changeable.

To foster exchange about feminism and transgender, the Feminist Activist Forum held a “Gender and Sex Diversity Learning Exchange” at the Lambeth Young Women’s Project in South London in July 2008. The product of months of hard work, the event created a space where transgendered people could speak openly about their experiences, in a way similar to consciousness raising; Second Wave feminists could express their doubts about transgender; and queer feminists could show how intersex politics is related to more familiar feminist concerns, such as the right to bodily autonomy, abortion, and the politics of consent. The day was a success insofar as it brought together lots of different groups of people who were emotionally and actively involved. Although no “resolutions” were achieved, the meeting was an important contribution to advancing the priorities of contemporary feminist activism within the United King-

dom. It brought together feminists of different positions and generations in an intimate, dialogical space that did not end up silencing either transgender people or radical feminists (although at least one member of the radical feminist panel felt she had been “set up” by the younger, trans-positive organizers to appear ignorant and prejudiced).

On *The F-Word*, one of the most widely read forms of feminist media based in the United Kingdom, with over 150,000 hits per month, the issue of feminism and transgender has been further complicated. *The F-Word* attempts to provide a neutral political forum to support especially the voices of emerging feminist activists and writers in the United Kingdom. The site seeks to be inclusive of all feminists by providing a platform for many different feminist voices, including transgender feminists, women of color feminists, radical feminists, and queer feminists.

In March 2008, *The F-Word* created controversy when it started a new feature by a transgendered feminist, Helen G., who often writes about the political tensions between feminism and transgender politics. Her articles explore questions such as “What is Transfeminism?” or a “Trans 101 directory”; she also re-posts pieces by other transfeminists and their allies, such as “An Open Letter to Cis Feminists.” In personal correspondence with me in 2009, Jess McCabe, editor of *The F-Word*, expressed her surprise at the resistance of some of the site’s readers: “I think that to some degree when Helen started blogging, we were . . . unprepared for the level of transphobia and harassment that she received. . . . People were questioning Helen’s right to contribute to the site, but features by men are almost entirely met by a wave of positive comments, not concern that this is ‘de-centring’ feminism from women.” For an example of this hostility, consider this comment made by Beth R. to a post by Helen G. about the 2008 Transgender Day of Remembrance, a day to contemplate transgender people who had died often as a result of violence: “I do however think that there are debates to be had as to whether transwomen should be included in all woman-only spaces, whether women have a right to be upset about being de-centred in feminist debate by terms such as cis, and whether we ought to be working towards a reality in which transitioning is no longer the ‘solution’ to gender dysphoria.” In this comment Beth R. reveals a fear of transitioning gender and implicitly reifies stable gendered categories

(female/male). Yet part of the political possibility of the “trans” of transgender (and perhaps why it is so troubling) is the understanding that gender is always *transitioning*.⁶

Despite some negative responses, The F-Word demonstrates the influence of queer politics on contemporary feminism. For example, the faceless nature of the Internet leads some feminist bloggers on The F-Word to immediately assume gender-neutral or “third-gender” pronouns (such as *hir* and *zie*) when they are posting comments. Claiming such a pronoun means that, online at least, there is not the immediate presumption that the feminist subject is a “she” or a “he.” These online, textual reconfigurations of gender identity challenge the idea that feminist space always belongs to those who identify as “she” (and implicitly a cisgendered “she”). In this way The F-Word contributes to a gender queering of contemporary feminist communities, at least in their online manifestation. These online exchanges, rather than being disembodied from “real life,” are important because they have the capacity to “reverberate through spaces, bodies and psyches. . . . On-line and off-line worlds are always intertwined.”⁷

However, the lack of clarity as to what women-only means continues to plague feminist organizing in the United Kingdom. In 2009, members of The F-Word blog collective asked the London Feminist Network to publicly state whether their women-only events were inclusive of transwomen, noting that “the organisers of all feminist events and groups need to ensure—from the outset—that trans women are explicitly welcome in spaces designed for women only. . . . Simply stating that a space is ‘women only’ is inadequate.”⁸ After initially saying that transwomen were not welcome, the London Feminist Network changed its position because of this activist pressure.

Within contemporary U.K. feminism, the issue of transgender and feminism is then, by no means, resolved. Also, there is little reflection within the spaces described in this article about how race, class, or physical ability affect the specific issue of transgender, feminism, and women-only space.⁹ Importantly, since 2007 there are increasingly more instances of open debate between radical feminists and trans-positive feminists. Feminist space—physical and virtual—is increasingly queered, in a way that does not assume the gender of its participants. The circulation of language

and concepts—particularly on blogs—that explore the privilege of cisgendered feminists has been a useful tool for highlighting the oppression of transgendered people. In December 2009, prolific feminist blogger Laurie Penny argued on *The F-Word* the case for a feminism that recognizes the vital role of transgender in deconstructing normative gender roles.¹⁰ Such voices challenge the idea that people who see no discrepancy between their gender and the sex they were born with are any more “natural” or “authentic” than people who do. This furthers understanding of how female cisgendered feminists can uphold the power dynamics of patriarchy, even though they claim to be deconstructing those structures. Transphobia fundamentally undermines the principles of feminism itself.

NOTES

1. See Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979; New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 104; and Zachary L. Nataf, *Lesbians Talk Transgender* (London: Scarlet Press, 1996).
2. Louise Livesey, “Million Women Rise—Reflections.” This appears on the Web site, *The F Word: Contemporary U.K. Feminism*, www.thefword.org.uk/features/2008/08/million_women_r. See also Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune, *Reclaiming the F-Word: The New Feminist Movement* (London: Zed Books, 2010).
3. Helen G., in “Trans 101,” writes that the term “cis-gendered” “may also be used as a synonym for non-transgender (‘trans’ means across; ‘cis’ means on the same side),” www.thefword.org.uk/features/2008/03/trans_101.
4. See Feminist Activist Forum, www.feministactivistforum.org.uk.
5. See <http://womynspace.blogspot.com/> and <http://millionwomenrise.com>.
6. Beth R. to Helen G., “Transgender Day of Remembrance 2008,” 20 Nov. 2008, www.thefword.org.uk/blog/2008/11/transgender_day. To access Helen G.’s author archive on *The F Word*, go to www.thefword.org.uk/blog/by/helen_g/.
7. See Ari Kuntsman, *Figurations of Violence and Belonging: Queerness, Migrant-hood, and Nationalism in Cyberspace and Beyond* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 5.
8. Laura Woodhouse, “Feminism in London Workshop,” www.thefword.org.uk/blog/2009/10/feminism_in_lon_3.
9. For debates on race and queer, feminist and DIY communities, see www.racerevolut.org.uk and raceprivilegeidentity.wordpress.com.
10. Laurie Penny, “Moving towards Solidarity: Transphobic Feminism Makes No Sense,” www.thefword.org.uk/features/2009/12/cis_feminists_s.