

Trans Liberation and Feminism

Self-determination, healthcare and revolutionary struggle

Michelle O'Brien, November 2003

I wrote the following as a lecture that I gave at Reed College in November 2003. I will probably be giving it again, with slight modifications, at Eugene Laine during February 2004. A lot of it, as might be obvious, is taken from my other essays.

Special thanks to Colette Gordon for bringing me, and to Jaci Adams, Dean Spade – east coast trans activists that have been a major inspiration to me throughout my work.

As Colette mentioned, I'm visiting here from Philadelphia. I work as a social service worker around HIV with transgender people. Over the last couple of years, trans communities in Philadelphia have been coming together around a range of remarkable and exciting community organizing projects. We're fighting for decent, respectful healthcare, challenging violence against trans people, mourning our losses and supporting each other across our diverse communities.

All of us come to this work from different backgrounds. We each bring our perspectives, experiences and ways of working and thinking through building community and movements for social change. To our meetings and discussions I bring my own strong histories in anti-imperialist protest, anarchist community organizing and feminist consciousness. All have proved contentious and complex in their relationship to trans liberation and community building.

For the last few weeks, I've been traveling around discussing the relationship between trans health organizing and global systems of capitalism and white supremacy. Today I want to shift this focus a bit, and think about some of the interrelationships between trans politics and feminism. I'm certainly not the first to have done so. The last thirty years have been marked by massive, sustained and vicious battles over the meaning of gender, feminist movement and identity. Many before me have written and spoken articulately and brilliantly on these relationships. Two in particular – Emi Koyama and Patrick Califia – are worth singling out for their remarkable contributions and particular inspirations for my talk here.

Thinking through the interrelationships between movements for liberation is an urgent and crucial task. We are facing a rapidly transforming political terrain, as transnational capitalists have consolidated unprecedented levels of wealth and power, as state regimes have intensified their racist, misogynistic and transphobic assaults on poor people around the world, as many resistance movements are floundering in a state of crisis. It's increasingly clear that different forms of oppression are interconnected across the fabric of our lives and bodies. Building movements of popular liberation depends on transforming these interrelationships into strong, cross-community and cross-issue coalitions for justice. These coalitions are strategically and

ethically necessary. But if these coalitions hope to actually begin to challenge the entrenched regimes of violence and domination that criss-cross the world, they must be much deeper than the opportunistic attempts at working together. We need to recognize, deeply, the complexity and inseparability of liberation for all.

So I'm talking a bit about trans politics and feminism. Not just the overlaps and arguments, not just envisioning a simple union, but really trying to imagine means of understanding liberation so that we are all, by necessity, active participants.

contentious histories

The histories of relationships between trans people and feminism is not a simple one. Much of the feminist movement that came together in the 1970s in the US articulated a vision of liberation and women's identity in active opposition to certain forms of gender variance, most notably transsexual women and butch and femme lesbians. These movements, often called 2nd Wave feminism, offer a tremendous amount that is invaluable for challenging patriarchal and transphobic oppression. Tragically, some of this organizing and thought has been mired in a vicious animosity towards gender variant people.

Gender variance was a central part of working class queer women's communities in the US through the 50s and 60s. Recent texts on lesbian history and identity, such as Kennedy's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, or Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* have described the rich world of American lesbian bar culture. These scenes were often organized around butch and femme gender identities, forms of gender identity and expression embedded in the desires and relationships among queer female-assigned people.

These forms of queer masculinities and femininities came under sustained assault in significant currents of 70s feminist politics. In the name of rejecting patriarchal constructions of gender, some feminists argued for a wholesale rejection of masculine and feminine gender expressions, instead advancing a certain form of female-centered androgyny as the way forward for lesbian feminists. While butch and femme people were certainly involved actively in the remarkable organizing towards women's liberation that took shape through the 70s, their presence was increasingly dismissed, maligned and erased.

Les Feinberg provides an excellent summation of the political ethics of this overvaluation of androgyny and dismissal of other gender expressions, in saying that "androgyny is a powerful, liberating expression if your true, deep personal gender expression and identity is androgynous." The many feminists like Feinberg for whom androgyny was not such a personally attractive option found themselves marginalized in some currents of these new feminist movements.

These currents of feminism that dismissed butch and femme identities unleashed an even more nasty and brutal assault against trans women. Transsexual women, drag queens and other

gender variant mtf people have been involved in gay liberation and feminist liberation politics throughout the second wave. Trans women fought in the streets at Stonewall, were active in consciousness raising circles, organized centers against sexual assault or in support of reproductive freedom, started lesbian feminist arts groups and were active in all levels of feminist movement.

The 1979 publication of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of The She-Male* marks the central event in intensifying hatred of trans women within feminist politics. Raymond charges that transsexual women were invited by the patriarchal medical establishment to infiltrate and destroy feminist movement and lesbian community. A stark example of vicious hate literature, *The Transsexual Empire* crystallized and articulated so-called feminist hatred of trans people. Her book was heralded and celebrated by many famous radical feminists at the time, including Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly and Robin Morgan. Much of my analysis of this book is taken from Patrick Califia's book *Sex Changes*.

The Transsexual Empire had a lasting and destructive impact. It sparked a massive flurry of hate mail, threats and boycotts against Olivia Records, a lesbian feminist record production collective. Olivia had one active transsexual woman, named Sandy Stone, who had been involved with the collective since its formation. Raymond's book inspired a massive, systematic, hate-filled assault on the collective, until they were coercively forced to ask Sandy Stone to leave. The book continues to be reprinted by feminist and progressive presses, as it continues to reflect widespread transphobic ideas within feminist politics.

These two forms of transphobic feminist politics – against butch and femme people, and against trans people – share with other currents of feminism certain crude and unhelpful tenets. They rest on essentialist and narrow ideas of proper women's identity and expression, a deeply naturalized romanticization of specific forms of women's body and demonization of masculinity. Women's unity would be built, some believed, on some essential sameness, some core experience of one's body and oppression, that all women shared. This unity is counterpoised against masculinity and men as fundamentally oppressive forces of domination and oppression. They rested on the destructive idea that policing other people's gender identity was the way forward for challenging systemic patriarchy. As Patrick Califia explains, concrete goals of gender equality have given way to these attacks on women within feminism. He writes, "The personal and public lives of women who claim to be feminists are instead examined and policed because if these women fail to excise maleness, they are seen as obstructing the feminist struggle."

The challenge to such oppressive currents of such tenets of 2nd wave feminism was first really rigorously developed and articulated among radical women of color. Through the 80s an amazing collection of feminist and womanist activists and intellectuals of color began to challenge the deep, long standing forms of racism within dominant forms of radical and liberal feminist movement. The idea that all women shared some central experience, and this experience is a basis of unity, erases and ignores the ways white supremacy drastically separates women in racist structures of privilege, power and domination. Racism offers a clear

example of the ways women can actively oppress each other, and benefit from each other's oppression. White supremacy is a way that all women simply do not have identical experiences of the patriarchy. Emi Koyama offers one of the clearest analyses that recognizes the value of antiracist critiques of feminism to informing trans liberation thought.

Throughout the 1980s major upheavals shook feminist movement. Institutional, misogynistic backlash reentrenched patriarchal domination into state policy and right-wing cultural values. At the same time, many women began to organize around their historical exclusion, marginalization and oppression within feminist politics. Women of color led the way in this powerful work. Women involved in BDSM sexual practices, butch and femme women, trans people of all genders, sex workers and others were also heavily involved, demanding a more inclusive, more sophisticated feminist politics.

The exclusion and marginalization of trans people in feminism didn't end, however, with the agitation of the 80s and 90s. Old-school forms of feminist transphobia are alive and well, expressed in such policies as the active exclusion of trans women from the Michigan Women's Music Festival. As well, many have questioned the extent of trans inclusion in new forms of poststructuralist feminist thought and queer theory, which have often dismissed the deepest intensity of gender identity for many transsexuals.

The essentialist, narrow basing of liberation politics on simplistic ideas of identity and experience also continues in countless other forms of identity and liberation struggles, including within trans communities.

gender skirmishes

Trans communities have shown many similarities to feminism in developing elaborate systems to rank, compare and denounce some forms of identification and presentation. In particular, I'm talking here a bit about the animosity between genderqueers and transsexuals manifesting in many trans spaces I've encountered, such as strap-on.org, Philadelphia support groups or at the True Spirit Conference. While the full history and complexity of these tensions are outside the scope of this lecture, it might be worth a moment to describe these debates.

Both transsexual and genderqueer are identities that have taken shape within particular historical moments to give voice to people's experience of their own gender identities and bodies. Amidst our society of deep, pervasive hatred of gender variant identities, and bodies, both genderqueers and transsexuals have struggled to define ourselves as somehow legitimate. As identities and ways of thinking about gender, genderqueer and transsexual identities have too often come to be defined in opposition to each other.

Genderqueer as an identity has been linked with a particular political critique of binary gender systems. Genderqueer people often understand ourselves as somehow not entirely fitting within gender binaries. Perhaps neither male nor female, or both male and female, or flexibly playing

between them, genderqueer identification is often somehow in opposition to specific, concrete, stable single-gender identities. This has become linked to a politicized critique of the system of binary, dualistic gender identities. Many genderqueer activists and theorists, such as the commentary of Rikki Anne Wilchins in the recent book entitled *Genderqueer*, or passages in the writing of Kate Bornstein, have attacked other transsexuals as conforming and reproducing this oppressive system of gender dualism. Genderqueers, some argue, are a radical vanguard challenging the most basic oppressive systems of gender. Transsexuals, meanwhile, are dismissed as politically reactionary among some genderqueers.

Some transsexuals have launched their own attacks of genderqueer identity. Dismissing genderqueers as shallow opportunists, uncommitted, confused people appropriating transsexual identity, genderqueers are charged as not being authentic. Genderqueers, some anti-genderqueer transsexuals have argued, are a privileged collection of people superficially fooling around with issues, words and identities with deep, life-threatening and liberating implications for transsexuals.

These nasty bitter disputes resemble similar battles within feminist politics. Tensions between some androgynous feminists and butch or femme people, or tensions between transphobic feminists and trans women, share a similar dynamic of people ranking, comparing and evaluating identities based on political models.

It's a frequent step of identity politics to see one's one identity – or system of linking identities – as more radical, more liberating, more legitimate, more authentic or more substantive than another. Both genderqueer activists, privileging gender transgression, and transsexuals, privileging legitimate gender identities, have engaged in a destructive form of privileging certain systems of gender identity about others. We have put our identities, our liberation, our movements, in contradiction and competition with each other. This is a grave mistake.

Ultimately, the charges against both genderqueers of appropriation and transsexuals of conformity, or similar debates within feminism, rely on a politics of scarcity that is profoundly destructive to envisioning a viable movement. Liberation is not something we have to compete or fight over. It's not something like privilege, that one person has access to because another is denied it. Justice is not something that I ever, in the end, benefit from its denial to anyone. The old slogan 'No one is free when others are oppressed' couldn't be more true, especially when we remember that real freedom and privilege are never the same. My access, as a transsexual or genderqueer, to a particular way of thinking about and challenging some notions around gender, is not something that I lose because someone else also finds it useful and empowering, or because someone else has their own form of gender expression. Scarcity is a pervasive and tempting politics, one that feeds the competition between oppressed communities.

We have to go deeper than just identifying the strategic suicide and ethical bankruptcy of such tensions, and begin to sort out their underlying emotional reality. Attacking other marginalized people as somehow destroying, stealing or hurting one's one liberation is a tempting one. I

know for myself how desperate and scared I am, how very deeply transphobia and misogyny has scared me in my psyche and soul. From that fear and pain, it's easy to be terrified that someone is stealing or diluting the only thing left that clearly belongs to me – my identity and politics. It can feel easy and helpful to lash out from this space of pain on other marginalized people whose oppression and suffering manifests differently than my own. We compete against each other out of our desperate, terrified experiences of the traumas of oppression.

This competition between marginalized communities feeds our profound trauma of transphobia. Facing rejection, violence and discrimination in a whole range of spaces, gender variant people and women are often left deeply emotionally scared. We turn to each other for love and support, to heal each other of the pain of oppression. Too often, though, those relationships end up reproducing this very violence – unleashing on each other the pain, anger and rage we have accumulated in our daily lives. Even more insidious, that pain gets directed inward into self-hatred and self-denial. The tensions between genderqueer and transsexual people, like many tensions between marginalized communities, is one of many products of the traumatizing and corrupting effects of that fear.

Too often, I have come to believe, we forge our politics from those spaces of fear and desperation. When we are rooted in our fear, it is easy to find enemies, to find anger, to find fights with those people close at our sides. Our fear fuels our desperate, defensive need to hold onto particular ways of being that are legitimately ours. It is easy to believe that others are inauthentic and should be denied access to what little we have, when we are scared we have almost nothing at all. Evaluating who should have access and who shouldn't relies on developing elaborate systems of ranking, judging and dismissing people based on degrees of oppression, privilege and suffering. Our right to liberation is not based on our degrees of suffering. Our fear fuels a politics of competition and scarcity, a dead end of judging and attacking each other.

Something else is profoundly needed.

self-determination in trans and feminist healthcare

We need to shift out of a politics based on ranking, competition and scarcity. Revolutionaries of all movements are involved in exactly this kind of work. Countless theorists, activists and others have taken incredible steps towards advancing a different kind of politics, one based on recognizing the profound inseparability of liberation, resistance and struggle. Again, feminists of color have provided one of the most sustained and invaluable bodies of writing where the intersections of oppression constitute the basis of struggle. In the case of linking trans politics to feminism, Emi Koyama's *The Transfeminist Manifesto* remains a central and compelling text.

In thinking about ways of recognizing the potentially powerful interrelationships between trans and women's liberation, here I'd like to focus for a bit on the issue of healthcare. In my own activist and social service work I've been centrally involved around trans health organizing in

Philadelphia over the last couple of years. Demanding a restructuring of the healthcare system to provide respectful, accessible and adequate care to low income trans people has become a major priority of many trans community activists.

Last May we held the second annual Philadelphia Trans-Health Conference. It was a powerful event, drawing a diverse crowd of trans people, social service and healthcare workers and others from throughout the region. We talked about political organizing and activism, about the health needs among poor trans people and people of color, about the resources and support networks developed with trans communities. Consistently, people at the conference emphasized the rights of all trans people to self-determination and dignity in healthcare.

We chose the theme for the year as "Our Bodies, Ourselves, Too," with "too" spelled T-O.O. The name is a reference to the well known and extraordinary book first published by the Boston Women's Health Collective in 1976. The book represented a great achievement of feminist healthcare activists. Feminists organized heavily to establish women's health centers, expanding professional knowledge of the specific healthcare needs of women, demanding and defending the rights to reproductive freedom and above all sharing the knowledge, expertise and political awareness of healthcare issues among women ourselves. Our conference's theme simultaneously honored and respected this legacy, and recognized the historical exclusion and absence of transgender bodies from this work.

The legacy of 2nd wave feminism isn't just transphobia, hatred of butches or femmes and arrogant racism. 1970s feminism also advanced incredibly powerful movements for radical healthcare reform and self-determination over bodies with a massive and lasting impact on the healthcare rights of all people. Drawing on the work in the 50s and 60s among black women around establishing healthcare networks in poor urban American communities and propelled by the incredible work of working class women and women of color, feminist healthcare activists made amazing strides in expanding, dramatically improving and restructuring healthcare access for many women. A women's right to choose takes many forms -- from abortion to an end to state sterilization of women of color, from an affordable gynecologist to an antisexist counselor, from economic independence to freedom from abusive relationships. The feminist commitment to choice is precious and liberating.

This legacy of feminist healthcare politics and the incredible organizing around health among working class women and women of color has made my work around transgender healthcare possible. When trans activists are working to establish low-income trans healthcare centers or do harm reduction education on silicone injection, we are working in the steps of feminism. We are grounding our politics in the commitment to self-determination over own bodies.

Trans people's bodies and access to healthcare is tightly and strictly regulated. Transphobic medical institutions have systematically denied most trans people access to respectful care, hormones and other forms of basic medical necessity. Instead, many doctors have constructed an elaborate system to pathologize, judge, rank and control the lives of trans people –

determining who gets hormones and who doesn't based on systems of transphobic, homophobic, classist and racist evaluation. Trans healthcare is a clear site where the ranking and evaluating of identities ends up being brutally oppressive. Instead, as trans activists we are fighting for self-determination – the right of all trans and gender variant people to make our own choices over what we do with our own bodies, and to have access to the medical care to do so.

Like feminists before us, trans people are fighting a struggle over the politics of own bodies. There are many struggles in Philadelphia and around the world committed to a similar vision of self-determination of one's own healthcare and bodies.

Feminist debates around sex work and porn, for example, have dramatically shifted from a blanket condemnation of commercial sexual activity as inherently evil and oppressive. Instead, many feminist sex workers and porn makers have been pushing for a feminist politics rooted in honoring the self-determination of women making their own choices around sexuality, sexual expression and employment. While still recognizing the potentially coercive dynamic in any commercial relationship, these activists have shifted the attention of feminist politics towards defending and standing aside sex workers in struggles over workplace conditions, healthcare and safety. Again, Patrick Califia and Emi Koyama have both done significant work, among many others, in articulating a pro-sex, pro-sex worker feminist politics.

Intersex organizing provides another clear example of gender-related struggles over self-determination in healthcare. Many intersex people have begun organizing to put an end to unnecessary and damaging surgeries altering the bodies of intersex infants. Such surgeries, designed to normalize bodies into crudely male or female stereotypes, have had a deeply destructive impact on the physical, psychic and sexual lives of many people.

AIDS and drugs

In Philadelphia, I and others have been working to develop the interrelationships between trans healthcare and healthcare access for people with HIV and active drug users. All are struggles of trans people and many others over survival in the midst of large changes in global capitalism and US state violence.

Of the 43 million people living with HIV around the world, 95% lack access to basic medications. Movements of people living with HIV have organized across the globe to demand their governments manufacture and distribute affordable, generic HIV medications. Multinational pharmaceutical corporations, in turn, have sued under international patent law. The companies are profiting off of the denial of HIV meds to vast populations across Africa, Asian and Latin America. ACT UP Philadelphia has been on the forefront of standing with these global HIV meds to demand affordable HIV care, a restructuring of international trade regulations and the rights and urgent need of governments to address their population's healthcare.

Like trans people, active drug users face extreme marginalization in accessing healthcare. Active illegal drug users are barred from housing, healthcare and most social services. Treated as delusional, unthinking addicts, drug users are consistently robbed of their own self-determination. This is part, of course, of what we call the war on drugs. In the last twenty five years, the United States has adopted a policy of massive criminalization of drug use. Through militarizing the police system to serve as occupying armies in working class urban neighborhoods, dramatically expanding the profit prison industry and changing sentencing guidelines, over 2 million people are currently incarcerated in the United States. This is the highest rate in the industrial world, and acts as an implement of massive suffering in poor communities of color. Prisons and police occupation destroy families, people's lives and rob communities of political and economic self-determination.

The focus of this racist and classist state violence has been directed against drug users themselves. Legally denied access to basic social services, healthcare, housing or employment, active drug users are among the most intensely marginalized segment of US society. US policies toward drug users, like trans people, only make sense as strategies to kill us off, totally devaluing our lives and bodies as less than worthless. Humane, effective and respectful services to active drug users, such as a decent needle exchange, are criminalized or barred from access to funding.

In the midst of this nightmarish political scape, some people have been organizing around the rights of drug users and against the prison system. Active drug users, in coalition with the more progressive currents of social services, have been organizing against incarceration, criminalization and in favor of adequate healthcare, housing and other basic needs. Trans people, both as active illegal drug users and in accessing trans-specific services have participated in and benefited from this work. Further, much of the war on drugs has been targeted against women, and is intimately bound up legally and strategically with assaults on reproductive freedom.

All this work shares an extraordinary, revolutionary commitment to self-determination in healthcare for marginalized people. Focusing on healthcare is helpful for the ways our bodies link us to systems of transnational capital, white supremacy and violent transphobia and patriarchy.

The most vibrant expressions of feminist and trans politics have been committed to self-determination. This self-determination is not only with respect to one's body, but also in the absolute rights of people to self-express and self-define their own gender and identity in the ways that most fully and deeply suit themselves. Honoring self-determination in identity helps dispel the awful competition and nastiness between marginalized people. Androgynous or high femme, transsexual or genderqueer – people have the right to define and articulate their own identities. This insight, present in much of feminist and trans politics, provides the basis of rethinking identity politics.

revolutionary choice

Choices around one's own body and identity are deeply personal. For self-determination to provide a basis for a liberatory politics, however, it can't just be about one's individual decisions. Too much of the writing and thought on choice has been mired in crude ideas of voluntarist, individualist autonomy, as if any person could be separated from their communities and histories. Choice as an idea can bring with it baggage of white, yuppie assholes wanting everything to be organized for their benefit, the capitalist over-proliferation of consumer choices based on privilege, exploitation and environmental decimation.

All these examples around healthcare, however, argue for a far more powerful understanding of choice than an individual's decisions. Most women, and most trans people, are neither economically privileged nor white. Struggles over access to healthcare are not only personal, they are deeply bound up over global battles over race and class power.

Self-determination must go far beyond simply acknowledging someone's right to choose to have an abortion or take hormones. For many, these choices are inseparable from economic necessity, personal and cultural survival and oppression through white supremacy and poverty. It will be some time before rich white women lose the right to an abortion or have any reason to fear forced sterilization. Already, however, most poor women of color around the world are denied access to substantive reproductive freedom. Similarly, struggles over the health needs of trans people mean little without engaging the entrenched violence of racism and poverty that structure and limit the lives of so many gender variant people in Philadelphia and around the world.

Ultimately, talking about self-determination is talking about revolution. Counter to the most basic structures of capitalist domination, working class and poor people of all races have the absolute right to self-determine our future, their communities and human society. In opposition to colonial and neocolonial white supremacy, communities of color have an unquestionable right to define cultural, social and economic systems free of racist tyranny. For gender variant people in poor communities of color, self-determination is ultimately about the revolutionary transformation of social power.

A revolutionary politics of self-determination must be about recognizing and challenging systems of white supremacist capitalism and neocolonialism. Self-determination isn't just about making individual decisions – it's about communities, classes and nations seizing control of their own destiny from the grips of the domination of capital, state violence and colonization. A substantive radical gender politics must challenge all structures of domination as they are deeply interconnected across the surface of our lives and across this planet.

The self-determination of trans people must rest on recognizing the deep interconnections of transphobia, patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism and all other systems of domination.

Global wars of power play out within our bodies and consciousness, and our liberation is inseparable from all others. A transfeminist politics, like any substantive revolutionary politics, must move beyond ranking identities and competing over scarce resources, and instead lie in a vision of struggle and freedom that encompasses all people.

Two days ago I have myself another shot of Delestrogen, the hormone I take through an intramuscular injection every two weeks. In that shot I find my hope. It is there I am closest to my desire for finding a place of self-love, pride and healing in myself. In that hope is my deep yearnings for a politics of liberation that refuses competition, fear and scarcity. A commitment to liberation that sees how deeply interwoven our lives are. A yearning for a movement that will touch us all, that will heal our wounds, that will open up ways for us to listen to, love and support each other. In that shot, I am closest to that part of myself that is true to an unconditional love for all beings. And in that love I locate myself in the revolutionary struggle against patriarchy and transphobia, against state capitalism and white supremacist colonization, against domination in all its forms.