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TERF Wars: Narrative Productions of Gender and Essentialism in Radical-Feminist (Cyber)spaces

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TERF Wars: Narrative Productions of Gender and Essentialism
in Radical-Feminist (Cyber)spaces

by

Jennifer Earles

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology
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DEDICATION

Even before I understood feminism and how to put it into practice, my mother cared for me, encouraged me, and stood by my side. And, this process has certainly had its ups and downs. Through my own battle with colon cancer at 35, to the loss of my dear grandmother “Mimmi,” and to the death of my dog Spice who comforted me through it all, my mom, Jenny Hedden, accepted all my sadness, anger, and grief. She supported me with the unconditional love, care, and beauty that inspired me to push forward and succeed. I dedicate this dissertation to her and all the wonderful women in my life, especially my sister Eva and my grandmother Mimmi. Through her love, encouragement, and wonderful uniqueness, Eva has stayed my best friend through everything – she is someone who calls me every day just to make sure I’m happy, someone who drives 11 hours just to visit, and someone with whom I can laugh, cry, and scream at the world. We travel together and still love each other. And, though Mimmi is gone, I feel her love and inspiration everyday – through care and community, she became a feminist even before any of us knew what that meant. I love you all.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation concerns how activists preserve particular feminisms in everyday life, particularly in this postmodern moment as advances in technology create virtual spaces, as feminism experiences generational shifts, and as notions about gender and bodies influence the discursive and political construction of contemporary activism and communities. The particular feminists at the center of this study are self-described radical feminists. While original theories allowed members to question the essentialism of bodies (i.e., sex class), this study focuses on the movement trajectory in which members critique how people assigned male at birth learn masculinity as inextricably tied to the oppression of women (i.e., sex caste). Using data from a historical newsletter and two current micro-blogs, I provide a textual analysis to understand how public narratives of gender and essentialism circulate in and are challenged by feminist (cyber)spaces. The results of this project suggest four important findings. First, in print and online, people use imagined and essential understandings of bodies where actual bodies are not present in order to exclude. Second, when text reflects the personal, lived experiences of community members, logic and emotion are better connected in the everyday. On the other hand, when lived actuality is abstracted, storytellers rely almost exclusively on logic to make claims. Third, while lesbian newsletter-writers of the past constructed a sexual identity, they did not take on the radical-feminist mandate to talk about sexual desire. Online, only the radical identity of the movement's predecessor's has persisted, while any discussions of sexual identity or pleasure are missing. Lastly, while radical and trans-identified feminists often find themselves at odds,

this study suggests that perhaps their consciousness-raising practices are more similar than can be seen from the everyday. Both groups use poetry and creative writing as a way to make sense of their coming-out and being-out experiences amid cis- and hetero-normativity.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Self-proclaimed radical feminists made the popular and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) news more than once over the past few years (Anderson-Minshall 2015; Brownworth 2015; Burkett 2015; Goldberg 2014; Merlan 2015; Riese 2014; Serano 2014; Stuart 2014; Vogel 2014). That's because, after 40 years in 2015, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Michfest) – a radical-lesbian-feminist music festival held every year for “womyn-born women” – closed its doors. The festival's no-transsexuals-allowed policy was aimed at excluding anyone who was not seen as “women who were born as women, who have lived their entire experience as women, and who identify as women” – this is the very definition of “womyn-born women” (Vogel 2014). This policy also reflected the group boundary work some self-identified radical lesbian feminists took up using public narratives of gender and essentialism to make their claims about the connection between particular bodies and femininity. Sociologically, members used resources (e.g., public narratives, interpretive strategies, public narratives, cultural codes) to create and maintain social differences through symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002). And, in the case of Michfest, festival organizers constructed these group boundaries based on narrative productions of essentialist gender that extended from the public world into this seemingly closed circle of women. However, these taken-for-granted meanings and moralities surrounding narratives about gender and bodies did not go unchallenged. After continued pressure to change their policies to include trans women, Michfest festival organizers instead chose to end the event.

Here, it will be useful to conceptualize gender both sociologically and in terms of broader public narratives. Stemming from the work feminists did in the 1960s and 70s outside academia, feminist sociologists took up the idea that the analysis of gender necessitates a focus on the hierarchical division between women and men and the dialectical relationship between femininity and masculinity (Delphy 1993; Jackson and Scott 2002). In particular, Kessler and McKenna (1978) theorize about how everyday interaction produces two and only two genders and how others follow the act of “gender attribution” to mark sexed people. And, West and Zimmerman (1987) map out the ways gender is reproduced through both interpersonal and institutional accountability which makes it appear as if there are essential bodily differences. Of course, different groups of feminists have always defined and practiced gender in their own ways depending on the multiple stories competing during a particular time and space. For instance, while socially-circulating narratives of gender have shifted over the years, feminists have consistently found themselves opposing or taking up stories about gendered bodies, a gender binary, and essentialism. And, it is surrounding these ideas that the TERF wars rage on.

Online, the exclusionary practices of some radical-identified feminists continue and have been said to produce “...the most bitter battle in the LGBT movement today” (Wente 2014). Indeed, if social movements are conceptualized as those actions aimed at establishing a new order of life and disrupting normalcy (Blumer 1974; Davis 2005; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Giugni et al. 1999; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 2008), then feminism is more generally about changing socially-constructed identity categories (e.g., radical feminist, lesbian, woman) to reflect the everyday needs and experiences of women. However, social movements can also be about constructing and tearing-down new and old boundaries. And, in the case of some self-proclaimed radical feminists and trans women, they can also produce boundary or TERF wars. In

2008, an online feminist community popularized the term TERF (trans exclusionary radical feminist) as a way of making the distinction between those radical feminists who exclude trans women and those who do not. Encompassing far more people than the term transsexual, transgender or trans includes not only the small number of people who undergo genital surgery, but also those who take hormones, identify as a gender they were not assigned at birth, or publicly perform a gender that does not conform to the Western binary (Bornstein 1994; Califia 2003; Crawley et al. 2008; Feinberg 1996; Stone 1991; Stryker 1994; Wilchins 2004). It can be quite a flexible term compared with the term “womyn-born women” made so popular in the 1970s and at Michfest. However, while some see TERF as a simple distinction, some online radical-identified feminists assert that TERF is a slur and a diversion from more important issues like patriarchy or the social and sexual dominance of women by men.

In response to these TERF wars between radical feminism and the trans movement, John Stoltenberg (2014), a radical feminist author and long-term partner Andrea Dworkin, wrote:

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.

Grounded in the theories and activism of the 1960s and 70s, radical feminism was meant to be all about consciousness-raising away from people in power as a way to critique patriarchy (Echols 1989; Giardina 2003; Jones and Brown 1970; Koedt 1973; Valk 2002). Radical-identified feminists question the private sphere, especially sexuality, as imbued with politics. And, when lesbians practice radical feminism, members focus on critiquing heteronormativity or the normalization of heterosexuality and a strict gender binary. However, while the original theories of radical feminism allowed members to question the essentialism of bodies (i.e., sex class; see

Frye 1983; Rich 1980), they also have provided a way to critique how people assigned male at birth learn masculinity as inextricably tied to the oppression of women (i.e., sex caste). As a result, while some members have always practiced trans inclusivity (Williams 2016), some self-proclaimed radical feminists feared that women who “have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” or “cisgender” women (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, 461) would become invisible within their communities. Indeed, as trans women sought recognition, solidarity, and social justice within the feminist movement, new narratives arose that further distinguished exclusionary practices and ideas from those deemed more inclusive. Rather than differentiating between “trans women” and “women,” for instance, feminists now have the language to problematize the latter using the term “cis women” and the concept of cisnormativity or the idea that all people are cisgender. In response, however, some radical-identified feminists invoke ideas about bodies and biology, socialization, boundaries, and ownership of space to determine gender and to exclude perceived outsiders. And, as time progresses and communication becomes even more mediated and frequent online, it seems that some self-proclaimed radical feminists have worked to solidify the borders surrounding their theories and communities even more.

That leads to my key question: in this postmodern moment, as advances in technology create virtual spaces, as feminism experiences generational shifts, and as notions about gender and bodies influence the discursive and political construction of contemporary activism and communities, how do activists preserve particular kinds of feminisms in everyday life? Data come from a printed newsletter published from the 1980s to 2000s called *Womyn’s Words* in comparison with two current micro-blogs on Tumblr, #radicalfeminism and #transfeminism. I specifically focus on the narrative productions of exclusionary radical feminism and, when

contextually and historically appropriate, trans feminism. In 2003, Koyama defined trans feminism as a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation as intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women with liberation defined as the work women do in designing, funding, and implementing successful challenges to patriarchy and cis/heteronormativity. And, with these newsletters and interactive blogs, I provide a textual analysis (Atkinson and Coffey 1997; Bowen 2009; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Diamond 2006; Rapley 2007; Smith 1990a, b, 2001; Ng 1995) to show how public narratives of gender and essentialism circulate in and are challenged by feminist spaces and how everyday stories changes over time.

Methodologically, I rely on the theory of narrative productions of meaning in the public realm (Loseke 2016). Narratives shape our everyday experiences and even influences our conceptions of what we understand as real (Schiffrin et al. 2010). As scholars, we are beginning to understand how culture depends on narratives to maintain their coherence and to shape communications, expectations, and how people conceptualize the past and imagine what is possible. And, while empirical studies have focused on the stories individuals tell about themselves (Gergen 1994; Holstein and Gubrium 2000), small stories, and face-to-face communication, I take up Loseke's (2016) mandate to further the study of mediated communication about the workings of cultural meanings in socially-circulating stories.

Situating Radical Feminism and Lesbian Separatism within the Broader Movement

In the 1970s, some radical-identified feminist began using separatism or woman-only communities as a social movement tactic (Barnhart 1975; Browne 2009; Cassell 1977; Cavin 1985; Esterberg 1997; Freedman 1979; Freeman 2000; Garber 2000; Hoagland and Penelope 1988; Krieger 1983; Phelan 1989; Rudy 2001; Staggenborg 2001; Valk 2002; Whittier 1995).

Conceptually, Frye (1983) defines feminist separatism as an everyday, deliberate disconnection by women from men and from male-dominated institutions, relationships, and activities (see also Jeffreys 2003; Rudy 2001; Taylor and Rupp 1993; Taylor and Whittier 1992). In practice, lesbian feminism began and has fueled itself with the rejection of liberalism and, more specifically, the reliance on law and legal structure to define membership, individualism, and particular notions of rationality (Phelan 1989). It is also in the epistemological foundations of radical feminism and lesbian feminism, particularly the work of working-class/lesbians of color as early as the 1970s, that some scholars ground the early roots of queer theory (Garber 2000). Later on, queer theory would be defined as the work to undo heteronormative gender messages as a way to separate the expectation that sex is related to gender or sexual orientation (Butler 1990, 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). And, in order to disrupt gender, queer theorists argue that one can resist heteronormativity by performing the “wrong” gender well or unrecognizably (Bornstein 1994; Butler 1990, 1993; Wilchins 1997, 2004).

The separatist tactic employed by lesbians, however, divided radical feminist groups as some viewed these communities as a sign of the “depoliticisation” of feminism (Echols 1989). On the other hand, Cassell (1977) argues that the split in feminism resulted not from issues of political activism, but more from a divide between those women who identify as lesbians and those who identify as straight. This division has sparked many feminists to analyze the link between feminism and lesbianism as a radical form of political resistance (Clarke 1981; Frye 1983; Hoagland and Penelope 1988; Koedt 1973; Penelope 1975, 1990; Radicalesbians 1973; Rich 1980; Taylor and Rupp 1993; Stein 1993; Whittier 1995). Indeed, the early lesbian-feminist manifesto, “The Woman-Identified Woman” asked, “what is a lesbian?” To that, the authors posed a rhetorical thought: “A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of

explosion” (Radicalesbians 1973, 240). With this, a small group of straight-identified feminists followed the Radicalesbians’ lead by declaring themselves “political lesbians.” Once heterosexuality could be understood as an oppressive institution (see Crawley et al. 2008; Ingraham 1994; Jackson 1999; Jackson and Scott 2000; McCarl et al. 2000), lesbianism could be constructed as a conscious, political choice – “feminist theory in action” (Abbott and Love 1972, 136). This theory placed a central value on women and offered a “prime example of sexuality as a social construct” (Faderman 1991, 207-8). Once again, this also situates radical feminism as a precursor to queer theory.

The commonality of the “lesbian experience” was assumed by primarily white lesbians in the 1970s. However, the radical-feminist tenant that all oppression stems from sexism did not match the experiences of many women (Garber 2000). After a decade of radical-feminist practice, women of color and working-class women made it clear that focusing on sexism alone could not solve the problems of racism, classism, and homophobia in the world at large or in the movement itself. And, in the 1980s, two strains of radical lesbian feminism arose. One in which white middle-class women continued to hold most positions of feminist institutional power and one in which the movement focused on the agendas of women of color and sex radicals (Garber 2000). Specifically, *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981 chronicled the experiences of women in color in the broader lesbian-feminist movement and the Barnard College Sexuality Conference in 1982 marked the originary moment for the “sex wars” surrounding pornography and sadomasochism (Garber 2000).

Many feminists in the 1980s and 90s also began calling for practices of inclusion, intersectionality, social constructionism, and boundary blurring. By definition, however, intersectionality challenges challenge normative, singular, and universal identity categories,

particularly as informed by race and class (e.g., Anzaldua 1987; Bedolla et al. 2005; Collins 1990, 2000; Lorde 1984; Mann 2013; Minh-ha 1989; Mohanty 1984; Rich 1980). Sociologists also connect gender with the dynamics of whiteness (Brodkin 1992; Connell 2005; Ferber 1998, 2007; Frankenberg 1993; Jacobson 1999; Kimmel 2006; Roediger 2002). And, as I write this dissertation, however, radical-identified feminists are not the only feminists making the news and trending on social media about their exclusionary practices. Popular or mainstream feminism has been dubbed #whitefeminism by women of color and trans-identified feminists for their prioritization of gender over other social categories like race and class (see Pandit 2015).

As mentioned previously, group boundaries also play a key part in any social movement or community (Abbott 1995; Lamont and Virag 2002; McAdam et al. 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Tilly 1998), especially in how actors develop a sense of us/them (Melucci 1996), frame arguments (Benford and Snow 2000; Johnston and Noakes 2005), and use the everyday as activism. Gamson (1995) argues that while boundary-work helps distinguish insiders from outsiders, it also works against those who claim some degree of membership status. And, boundary-work can certainly lead to fragmentation and make building alliances between movement groups difficult (Crowley 2008; Coles 1999; Echols 1989; Flesher Fominaya 2007; Gamson 1995; Lichterman 1996; Snow 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992). In the case of lesbian separatism, some argue that identity politics sharpen the differences between people and groups and supports inequalities and essentialism without fully addressing the cultural bases of power (Alexander 1999; Humphrey 1999; Phelan 1989; Vaid 1995).

Research has focused on how self-identified radical feminists and lesbian communities grappled with how their understanding of the collective identity “woman” and how they built boundaries around this construct (Browne 2009; Gamson 1995, 1997; Halberstam 2005; Heyes

2003; Kendall 2008; Krieger 1983; McDonald 2006; Robinson 2006; Whittle 2000).

Sociologically, collective identity explains how movement actors enact their social and political commitments as empowered individuals, negotiate identity borders, and re-articulate dominant ideologies (Alexander et al. 2006; Friedman and McAdam 1992; Hunt and Benford 2004; Oberschall 1993; Polleta and Jasper 2001; Tarrow 1998; Taylor 1998; Taylor and Raeburn 1995; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Tilly 2002). And, because narratives speak to social and cultural discourses (Mishler 1995) as they relate to identities, many social movements are known as “identity movements.” Through the evaluation of existing narratives at all levels of social life, these movements make possible the construction of new narratives (Bernstein 1997) and reveal the continued circulation of public narratives about gender and essentialism within these feminist spaces.

Situating Radical Feminism in Online Spaces

As mediated communication targeted to mass audiences increasingly replaces face-to-face communication (Loseke 2016), radical-feminist stories about what is wrong and who is to blame have also moved online. While this is a textual analysis comparing historical feminist newsletters and contemporary blogs, it is important to note how “space” takes a center stage in how members tell their stories in terms of characters, plots, conceptualizations, and moral journeys. After all, gender is often described in terms of public and private domains, spatial segregation, and people’s differential access these resources (Spain 1992). Even the body becomes a spatial site for how gender and sexualities are displayed (McDowell 1999) and how people develop a sense of embodiment (Farman 2012). Online, scholars consistently note how the body is not “transcended” in these spaces, but actually serves as a necessary go-between of meaning and a

spatial signifier of what is accepted as real (Boler 2007). And, in terms of historical and moral journeys, radical-identified feminists of the past took up space previously occupied by patriarchy by writing themselves into existence on the pages of their newsletters.

Online, feminists also take up space amongst competing narratives about women. To paraphrase Foucault (1986), online worlds are not the “unreal” spaces of the utopia, but are the heterotopias through which we can examine the enaction of power/knowledge. Indeed, the texts or blogs themselves become an important “narrative space” in which the writing and reading experience become intertwined with the story and characters (Caracciolo 2013). Conceptually, space represents the social interactions and ways of communicating or organizing that happen between people, bodies, communities, and ideas. Space can also be forged by marginalized people who share a dominant identity and (in)formal institutions or through “ambient communities” in which people come together through shared tastes and activities (Brown-Saracino 2011, 2015). Either way, space is an important component in how stories are told.

While studies show how U.S. feminist movements are shifting forms, tactics, and targets offline (Whittier 1995) and that cyber-activism is crucial to trans education (Hill 2000), there is little empirical research about feminist work in online spaces (Ayers 2003; Crossley 2015; Ferree 2007; Martin and Valenti 2013). Thus far, scholars have studied Twitter (Earl et al. 2013) and Facebook (Maireder and Schwarzeneger 2012; Reger 2014). In particular, Crossley (2015) finds that Facebook enlarges and nourishes feminist networks, creates online feminist communities, expands recruitment bases for both online and offline mobilization, and increases opportunities for online interaction with adversaries. That may be because Facebook users use their real name on their profile and often post identifying biography information like where they live and work on the “About” page. Facebook users also can set up local “Events” to coordinate

connections offline. However, there are few studies about Tumblr (Hart 2015) and journalists identify this microblogging site as the space where these embittered TERF wars are happening online (Goldberg 2014; Loza 2014). And, unlike Facebook, Hart (2015) notes how Tumblr users adopt pseudonyms to hide their offline identities behind unique usernames in a way that often prevents in-person interactions. Following these studies, this study aims to expand the research about feminism online and to explore whether or not Tumblr blogs are capable of fostering the kinds of interpersonal networks that are critical to the persistence of the feminist movement.

Method: Narrative Productions of Meaning

Stories are powerful. Throughout history, people have used them to make sense of the world, to create connections within and between communities, and to build bridges between the past, present, and future (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). Riessman (2008) notes that a story – often used synonymously with narrative – is the collaborative process between the author and the audience. The storyteller weaves together texts, images, and powerful symbols based on a lived experience to construct a story and plots “from disordered experience” (Riessman 2002, 698). In doing so, narrators are able to “make sense of themselves, social situations, and history” (Bamberg and McCabe 1998, iii). Indeed, the process of telling one’s story is empowering, especially for those whose voices and experiences have been historically silenced. The power to produce stories imbues people with a sense of identity (Valentine 2008) and connects people with a larger community (Crawley and Broad 2004). And, as Atkinson (2007) notes, “We need to hear the stories of individuals from culturally unheard groups” (230). However, as researchers, we also must understand how the construction of knowledge through storytelling is informed by and intersects with broader ideas in the history, culture, and society (Loseke 2016; Riessman 2002).

In particular, this study reflects this intersection to show how particular kinds of movements, communities, and, as a result, ideas persist over time and across space.

This study depends on the phenomenological, constructionist, symbolic interactionist theory of narrative productions of meaning in the public realm (Loseke 2016). This theory centers not solely on those narratives used in sensemaking (Maines 2001) or those stories people write and tell about themselves (Baker 1996; Godwin 2004), but even more so on how public narratives circulate within and are challenged by these stories. This refocuses the Blumer-inspired studies away from sociological questions about meaning production as happening exclusively in small groups toward macro problems of power, social structure, organizations, culture, and discourse (Dingwall et al. 2012; Fine 1993; Hall 2003; Loseke 2016; Maines 2001; Musolf 1992; vom Lehn and Gibson 2011). Like Smith's (1999b) notion of the social, this re-focusing connects the local activities of people in the everyday with what Smith calls the ruling relations of the time. Indeed, Loseke (2016) offers a way to trace the circulation of public stories through the everyday and to understand how these communications can be understood by various audiences.

Stories that circulate in the public realm resemble small stories in that they are also composed of scenes, plots, and characters, and contain moral lessons. Unlike small stories, however, socially-circulating stories typically have multiple authors and are constantly challenged and modified in response to other narratives, current events, and cultural change (Loseke 2016). But, by connecting the stories that circulate the social world via text, blogs, and so forth with broader meanings, researchers can better understand how communication is widely understood by diverse audiences and how it reflects, perpetuates, and/or challenges shared ways of thinking. After all, it is through this connection that we can see how broader meanings of

gender and essentialism, for example, are used to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and moralities in order to tell different stories. It is here that we can also see how other aspects of narrative productions surrounding concepts like gender and essentialism circulate unchallenged to perpetuate ideas about bodies, boundaries, and exclusion.

Previously taken-for-granted meanings are challenged within the context of a more globalized and socially-fragmented world, where what we know is increasingly mediated (Loseke 2016). Swidler (1986) calls these “unsettled times” or those historical moments when something happens in the world that compels people to either re-orient themselves or to push for change or order. Yet, given this fragmentation, communication remains more or less understandable to audiences and communities with diverse world views, practical experiences, and moral values. This requires a rethinking of culture not as “the entire way of life of a people, including their technology and material artifacts” (Swidler 1986, 273), but more so as the “historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols” (Geertz 1973, 89). This definition allows us to better describe the connections between cultural meanings and action. This formulation also offers an image of culture as a “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views that people can use in varying configurations to solve problems, strategize, and to construct identities, movements, and communities (Swidler 1986, 273). It also allows for an analysis of how ways of ordering and action are persistent through time and space.

In order to expand upon this idea of culture, Loseke (2016) explores how the more-or-less widely shared systems of meaning in “symbolic codes” and “emotion codes” are incorporated into narratives. Symbolic codes are systems of *thinking* that people can use to construct narrative scenes, plots, characters and morals. In particular, symbolic codes have the potential to persuade audiences through appeals to logic as they refer to those interlocking

systems of meaning about how the world works, how the world should work, and of expected rights, responsibilities, and relationships. Also known as “collective representations” (Durkheim 1961), “discursive formations” (Foucault 1980), “semiotic codes” (Swidler 1995), “interpretive codes” (Cerulo 2000), “cultural codes” (Alexander and Smith 1993), “ideological codes” (Smith 1999), “cultural coherence systems” (Linde 1993), “cultural themes” (Gamson 1988), and “symbolic repertoires” (Williams 2002), symbolic codes organize concepts and objects into patterns so that audience members are encouraged to evaluate the story as believable and important.

Because effective persuasion speaks to both minds and hearts, however, appeals to logic alone are not sufficient (Loseke 2016). Emotion is also a necessary component in producing effective communication (Altheide 2002; Richards 2004; Waddell 1990). As a result, Loseke (2016) defines “emotion codes” as the expectations, standards, and ideals surrounding emotion that inform ideas about when, where, and toward whom or what emotions should be experienced, expressed, responded to, and evaluated (see also Loseke and Kusenbach 2008). Also known as “emotion schemas” (White 1990), “emotional cultures” (Gordon 1990), “emotionologies” (Stearns and Stearns 1985), “emotional discourse” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990), and “feeling rules,” “framing rules,” and “expression rules” (Hochschild 1979), these systems of meaning surround cultural ways of *feeling*. And, because the theory of the narrative productions of meaning in the public realm draws upon these various literatures, researchers can make connections across subdisciplines when analyzing these cultural codes. For instance, while I explore how symbolic and emotion codes are incorporated into members’ narratives about coming out and being out as lesbian and trans, I refer to Gamson’s (1988) cultural themes in a discussion of movement frames.

Analytically, symbolic and emotion codes are distinct; however, in practice, these codes are inextricably intertwined. While traditional images that promote a mind-body split, thinking cannot be separated from feeling in everyday life (Loseke and Kusenbach 2008). And, because symbolic and emotion codes are macro-level concepts, they cannot explain or predict how people might cognitively or emotionally evaluate socially-circulating stories (Loseke 2016). But, some codes are so central to social organization that they come to define the possibilities of communication within our culture (Swidler 1995). In other words, as stories are told and re-told they become an essential part of life in many circles. However, through a focus on the narrative productions of meaning, sociologists can connect socially-circulating stories with those locally-produced. By identifying the cultural “tool kit” actors draw upon to talk and write about their experiences and understandings of people, events, objects, and interactions, we can better understand how people assess themselves and others and the interactions between.

Symbolic and emotion codes also spark empirical questions about story production, circulation content, appropriation, and consequences of appropriation that I will take up with this study. I am interested in those questions posited by Loseke (2016) surrounding story circulation, including: What are the characteristics of stories that circulate most widely? Where do stories circulate? In what ways are stories transformed from one site of circulation to another? What are the social characteristics of audience members exposed to particular stories? I am also concerned with those about story content, including: What systems of meanings are incorporated into the story? What is the story setting and how does it influence how plots and characters can be understood and evaluated? What is the story plot? What social and political understandings does the plot reflect and perpetuate and/or challenge? Who are the major characters (victims, villains, heroes, fools)? What is the moral evaluation of characters? What are the relationships among

characters? What is the moral of the story? Whose values are promoted by this moral and whose values are ignored and/or criticized?

Data

Before I describe the data sets used in this study, it is important to note how a comparative textual analysis of feminist newsletters and interactive blogs is important in understanding how the public narratives of gender and essentialism disseminate in feminist (cyber)spaces. Feminist newsletters stemmed from the 1970s women's movement and created a space for activists to write about potentially sensitive issues in safety. While mainstream media outlets were not always sympathetic to feminist pursuits, the newsletter allowed communities to organize under consensus-based processes in which all members could participate. Here, the "personal is political" meant that the task was to link members' everyday experiences with the larger organizations of patriarchy and to offer up a historical record of feminist accomplishments in local communities. Likewise, newsletters also became a kind of instruction manual for how to practice feminism locally. However, while authors did not necessarily begin as a way of closing off discussions from opposing views, committees could form to determine whether or not a submission was "safe enough" for publication. Subsequently, deeply-held codes that were (and are) socially powerful – namely those surrounding gender and essentialism – also circulate through the narratives produced in feminist spaces as members exclude particular bodies and meanings.

Much like the exchange of feminist newsletters and zines, online textual networks also contribute to feminist organizing and the dissemination of feminist ideologies, goals, and strategies (Crossley 2015). Indeed, McKinney (2015) argues that the Internet and, subsequently,

social media and blogs, do not replace earlier forms of feminist publishing like newsletters, but build upon the women's print culture from decades before. However, unlike 1980s feminists who did not have an extensive literature from which to draw, blogs are produced interactively through a kind of back-and-forth conversation between integrated writers and audiences who are attuned to concepts and theories like intersectionality and white privilege that were still being developed as early communities organized. And, while newsletters were produced by groups of women who knew each other and who were cataloging the activities of a lived organization through the writing and publication process, blogs are situated within the virtual sphere that can be hostile to feminist ideas and where competing stories are produced in the same space. In other words, as anyone can participate in a disembodied context, online spaces are not safe spaces. This may also mean, however, that TERF wars become even more embittered as essentialism meets with other ideas.

Given these textual characters, my analysis also considers the time and context in which members wrote. As Smith (1990b) writes, "we should be concerned to locate the controlling frameworks and interpretive schemata provided by the social relation that the text originally intended (was written to intend)" (154). In other words, the cultural codes of the time must have been learned by the storyteller and intended audience in order for the text to be understood. While some feminist stories might perpetuate dominant notions of gender and essentialism, a focus on narrative productions can show us how historical groups might not have all the cultural tools available to contemporary groups. And, as members seek out stories to make sense of their troubles and community change (Frank 1995; Plummer 1995), the cultural codes used can eventually become the yardsticks by which members morally evaluate themselves and others (Baker 1996; Wood and Rennie 1994). As a result, socially-circulating stories can also become

institutionalized (Alexander and Smith 2003), and the codes used to position story characters can become “tied down” (Schudson 1989) and embedded within spaces (Fischer 2003; Stone 1997) so that communities may not survive ruptures between narratives and local actions.

Womyn’s Words

Self-proclaimed radical feminists in Florida began meeting on October 1, 1982 in what they called Salons – named after the cultural/intellectual collectives of Revolutionary France. As practicing separatists, these feminists formed a geographically- and ideologically-isolated space made up of “womyn-born women” away from patriarchy through Salon. During Salon, women met and developed theory because they saw feminism as all but invisible in their local area – and they certainly didn’t find much local lesbian consciousness-raising during that time. And, within the first year, Salon feminists formed the collective, Women’s Energy Bank (WEB), and began publishing their newsletter, *Womyn’s Words*. This newsletter became a beloved member of the community and was physically present during many meetings (e.g., folding parties). At its height, the mailing list was over 250 subscribers. And, while patriarchy led Salon feminists to form a safe space for lesbians, radical feminist thought informed how they interacted over time.

Just as Salon was conceived of by two feminists, it was kept alive by more than 65 members who attended these monthly, and sometimes bimonthly, meetings. The overarching organization, WEB, became a non-profit early-on and was formed to fund the feminists’ meeting place, print *Womyn’s Words*, house their library, provide outreach programs to women in need, attend national feminist conferences and gatherings, and more. Together, the women traveled to the Michfest where they learned many of the ideologies they put into practice locally. Women’s Energy Bank also meets the criteria outlined by Martin (1990) for a feminist organization.

Interestingly, however, lesbians led the group, but bisexual and straight women could participate. This exemplifies one divergence with radical feminist thought which often touted hierarchy in organizations as decidedly antifeminist (Freeman 1979; Bakter 1982; Pittman et al. 1984; Gelb 1987; Staggenborg 1989). However, the flat organizational structures radical-identified feminists often favored in discourse were not problem-free on the ground. As Freeman (1972) notes, informally-structured organizations accrue power that goes unacknowledged for a “tyranny of structurelessness.” A more hierarchical structure acknowledges emergent power and holds members accountable for that power (Martin 2013). For Salon feminists, one of their important goals was to topple heteronormativity and the erasure of lesbians. While certainly not unproblematic, Salon feminists chose to create a hierarchy with lesbians at the top.

Over the years, the women grew together to incorporate consensus decision-making, nonviolent conflict resolution, and feminist practices and activism. They held Salon programs about coming and being out, body image, fat oppression, ageism, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, journal writing and even financial planning, technical skills, substance, addiction, relationship challenges, health, art, history, and BDSM (bondage, dominance/submission, sadomasochism). Together, they traveled to the Michigan Women’s Music Festival, the Southern Women’s Music Festival, Take Back the Night, Pride festivals, and other feminist and lesbian gatherings. It was in Michigan where they learned many of the ideologies they put into practice locally. They endeavored to create a special place just for lesbians. And, every year, they collectively celebrated Salon’s anniversary with a birthday party to honor women.

Like some of their radical-feminist foremothers from the 1960s and 70s, Salon feminists positioned sexism as the most pervasive, extreme, and important of all social inequalities.

Certainly, the group experienced other conflicts – namely, their reluctant move from a print to an

online newsletter and, most importantly, the privilege of this all-white community. While members attempted to reach out to women of color through *Womyn's Words* and through support of the all-female, African American production, *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, their prioritization of a sex-class system de-prioritized their own racial privilege. That was undoubtedly the case for Salon feminists. Ultimately, however, their attachment to essentialist gender forced Salon to disband in the early 2000s. *Womyn's Words* was published until 2014.

Sample. I use data from the University of South Florida's Special Collections – *Womyn's Words* (dates 05/1983 to 04/2013: 3,554 pages) – a newsletter from the longest-standing cohort of self-identified radical feminists in Florida who practiced lesbian separatism. From the first issue, members began weaving together ideas about how to *be* a radical feminist and lesbian separatist during a time when the feminist literature was still growing. Through multiple authors, they also used *Womyn's Words* as a way to coordinate in-person activities by publishing each other's phone numbers and addresses (omitted in Figure 1 below), advertisements for local, feminist-oriented activities and events, classifieds for business opportunities, dating, rooms for rent, and invitations to potlucks, local festivals, classes, and more. And, as the newsletter was a product of a collective publishing endeavor, it became obvious that members' devoted a lot of time to writing, editing, layout, printing, folding, mailing, and, as a result, reading its contents.

In 1983, when the first issue was published, members typed out pages on a typewriter, copied issues with a mimeograph, and folded the newsletter by hand. The first issue contained 12 pages, three advertisements for local businesses, announcements for local events, and a front-page article about the "International Document on Women's Rights" (WEB May 1983). However, in the late 1990s, some issues of *Womyn's Words* were over 40 pages and included advertisements for the group's Salons, meeting notes, directories for WEB programs like their

“Accessibility Project,” book reviews, short stories and poetry, current events related to lesbian issues, two full pages of classifieds, two or more pages of announcements for local events, a distribution page, a mail-in subscription order form, and, at times, up to five pages of



Figure 1: (WEB April 1999) *Womyn's Words*, including front page and ad for Salon advertisements.

The late 1990s reflect what I will call the “height” of WEB in that these issues reflected the most opportunities for in-person activities, including four Salons across three Western Florida counties and ample announcements for members to help build the community through activities like the annual auction (see Figure 1) which benefited local women in need. The late 1990s also reflected the years in which *Womyn's Words* contained the most pages and advertisements, signaling an interest in supporting women-owned businesses and separatism

more generally. Up until 2011, *Womyn's Words* also retained a more locally-produced look in that the pages were printed in either black and white or offset in one other color (see Figure 1). However, when the newsletter's publication was taken over by a third party in 2011, announcements for computer and publishing classes ceased, signaling a departure from feminist print culture. After that, *Womyn's Words* was printed and published online in full color with professional-looking ads and a table of contents. However, these 20-page issues centered around nostalgia for the 1980s and 90s when Salon was in full swing and when women took control of the publishing process.

I took the time to read all issues, but concentrated my analysis on moments of conflict and boundary work when members did not agree on issues related to how the organization should handle change. Conflicts arose over allowing children at WEB events, whether or not women should be required to wear shirts at Salon, editorial issues of censorship in *Womyn's Words*, whether or not the newsletter and community-at-large should migrate online, and, of course, whether or not trans women *are* womyn. This analytic strategy helped me focus on how members used symbolic and emotion codes to create a community through *Womyn's Words*. I also emphasized those moments when public narratives of gender and essentialism were taken up without question in this separatist space so that members could make claims. For the purposes of this study, I should note that while these newsletters are readily available to the public, this is a small, local community. As a result, I chose to omit names unless aliases or initials were used in the original text.

Tumblr

Mediated communication or “communication at a distance” (Boltanski 1999) is most often transmitted through technologies like the Internet. In many ways, this type of

communication is replacing in-person contact in both its frequency and power (Knorr Cetina 2009). As symbolic and emotion codes are more widely shared, they are also becoming even more important in shaping evaluations of meanings and experience (Loseke 2016). And, while some scholars make note of how long-standing movements have migrated onto the web (Garrido and Halavais 2003; Lebert 2003; Martinez-Torres 2001; Wray 1998), others argue for the emergence of entirely new social movements that appear virtually (Carty 2002; Earl and Schussman, 2003, 2004; Peckham 1998; Schussman and Earl 2004). This relocation of activism has also sparked debate over whether or not Internet activism has changed social movements. Some argue that this shift has had no lasting impact (Diani 2000; Tilly 2004), while others present more fundamental change (Bimber et al. 2005; Earl and Schussman 2003, 2004). Most research supports the idea of simple accentuation (Bennett 2004; Earl et al. 2010; Fisher 1998; Myers 1994). What is important here, however, is how the social and political implications of how narratives are produced in these spaces and how radical feminism persists online.

Activists in the transgender movement also point to the Internet as a harbinger of productive growth for the movement. Social media and blogging (e.g., Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) in particular have allowed people to make contacts in urban and rural areas, to educate themselves and others, and to mobilize without ever having to come out in public as trans (Shapiro 2008). Social media is also the starting point many activists use to launch into various virtual worlds and Tumblr specifically fulfills several criteria outlined by Boellstorff et al. (2012) for a virtual ethnography in that it is multi-user, shared, persistent, and constantly evolving. In particular, Tumblr is also an important microblogging site for self-proclaimed radical feminists and trans women to write about themselves and to send updates to followers. Tumblr allows bloggers to share theories, establish boundaries and activist strategies, and

determine gender. For trans women and women of color, however, Tumblr is a kind of hashtag feminism that allows those who were previously silenced to broaden and radically redefine feminism. Tumblr is also the space where TERF wars are most evident online (Goldberg 2014; Loza 2014).

Sample. Because virtual studies are driven by research questions (Boellstorff et al. 2012), I chose to focus on social media and Tumblr in particular as this is the current space where the conflict between radical feminists and trans women is manifesting (Goldberg 2014; Loza 2014). That's why my data involve searches of both #radicalfeminism (472 pages) and #transfeminism (163 pages). In order to understand how feminisms persist online and to show how narrative productions of gender and essentialism are challenged and/or used in these spaces, I analyzed both these hashtags to make comparisons. At the time of data collection in 2015, there were roughly 163.9 million blogs and 72 billion posts on Tumblr. 1) 31% of all visitors are in the U.S; 2) the average user visits about 67 pages every month; 3) Tumblr is most popular with 18-to-29 year olds; 4) 16% of Tumblr visitors are Latino, 13% are Black, and 14% are white – data about other racial groups was unavailable; 5) 51% of U.S. users identify as male, while most of the other 49% does not identify in terms of sex or gender (Costill 2014). And, ever since Tumblr launched in 2007, this microblogging site has become one of the most popular social networking sites online.

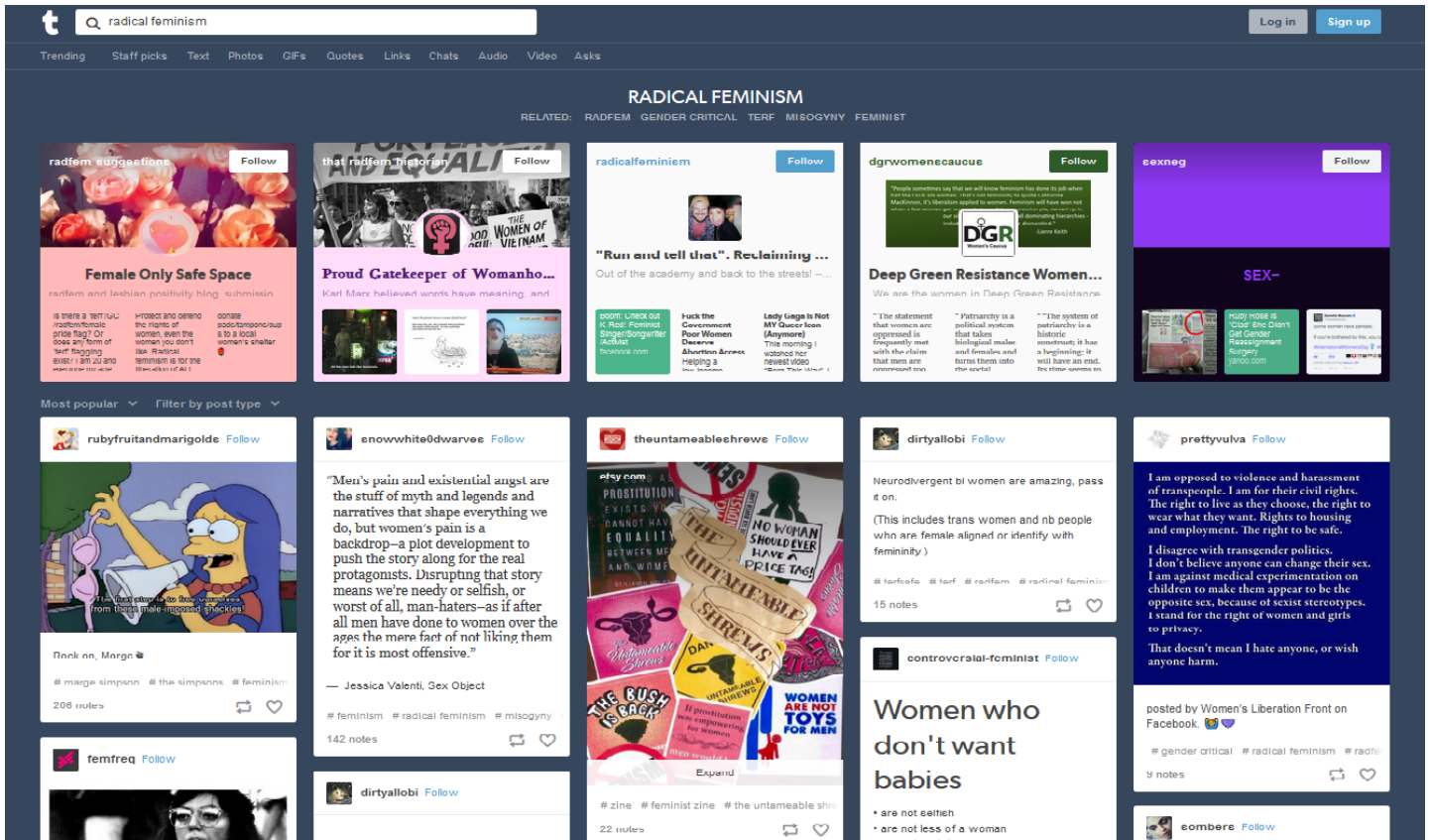


Figure 2: Tumblr #radicalfeminism

Compared to printed newsletters, anyone can contribute in an unedited format, which makes Tumblr a particularly attractive space for collective theories of feminism to flourish. On Tumblr, observers are first presented with a link to pages designated as “radical feminist” and offered a series of related searches like “radfem,” “gender critical,” “TERF,” “misogyny,” and “feminist.” Users then read posts in reverse order and, unless removed by Tumblr, users see all posts, which appear as a communal stream of consciousness organized by self-identifying hashtags. While Twitter has a short length limitation for posts, Tumblr does not. Tumblr also supports multimedia posts like images, audios, and videos (see Figure 2). Bloggers can post from anywhere at any time and “follow” one another, reblog one another’s post, click on a link to that

user's larger blog housed on another site, and make notes about others posts. For the purposes of this study, however, I chose to focus on the initial posts as they can be considered the "entry point" through which users enter a complicated virtual world. After all, while only some users may choose to click on the notes, all entry-point posts are visible in the initial search and add to the narrative productions of meaning in this space.

At the end of each post, a series of hashtags also appear noting how each particular blogger chose to catalog their thoughts (see Figure 2). In other words, if a user chooses to tag their post with #radicalfeminism, then it appears in this stream. Indeed, #radicalfeminism and #transfeminism are not necessarily limited to posts by self-identified feminists of that category; however, because they have chosen to make use of these particular hashtags, they are contributing to the overall narrative productions of meaning about radical feminism and trans feminism in these spaces. And, because Tumblr is open and without borders, this creates a translocal space where anyone with a computer and an Internet connection can log on and participate in the dissemination of discourse. This adds to the comparative feature of this study to show how radical feminism not only persists, but also how it is morphing as it moves online.

For these data, I relied on my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB)'s decision that this data is considered public and does not need IRB approval. While users are required to create a username and password to post comments, they do not need one to observe. I use usernames – if provided – to distinguish between authors. Once again, I collected these data in 2015 and took the time to read all the posts within these hashtags. And, like *Womyn's Words*, I concentrated my analysis on moments of conflict and boundary work. Online, debates were primarily about how best to *be* a feminist and how to define "woman." Once more, this analytic strategy helped me focus on how symbolic and emotion codes were used and on those moments

when public narratives of gender and essentialism were used to make claims. Unlike the narrative produced through *Womyn's Words*, however, Tumblr feminists have access to and appear quite savvy about the enormous breadth of feminist literature now available to activists. Indeed, a comprehensive analysis of *Womyn's Words* showed that during the 1980s and 90s members were still working out their own conceptualization of radical lesbian feminism based on their lived experiences. In 2015, however, Tumblr feminists drew upon the work of exclusionary radical-feminist theorists and authors to draw borders. In this way, it seems they intentionally made use of essentialist gender to make claims about bodies and feminism more generally.

Research Techniques

My analysis focuses on narrative productions of gender and essentialism in radical feminist spaces to ask questions about social movements, gender, bodies, and space. Public narratives of gender and essentialism circulate through the stories these feminists tell in how members challenge or take up these cultural codes. Through a systematic narrative comparison of texts, I observe the links between small stories and the cultural influences that make the meanings behind identity and community production visible. More specifically, Atkinson and Coffey (1997) refer to texts as “social facts” that are produced, shared, and used in socially-organizing ways (47). Indeed, cultural representations can be identified in texts (Bowen 2009); however, texts also have a way of enacting codes and teaching audiences about the specific symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views that make up specific cultures (Potter and Wetherell 1994).

Textual or document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted so as to draw out meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Atkinson and Coffey

1997; Bowen 2009; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Diamond 2006; Rapley 2007; Smith 1990a, b, 2001; Ng 1995). And, in a comparative analysis of historical and contemporary texts, a textual analysis helps to describe the trajectory of narratives so as to show how they are produced. Analysis specifically focuses on how ideas, practices, and identities, emerge, transform, mutate, and become the relatively durable things we take for granted (Rapley 2007). Textual analysis also encourages us to think about how the data is organized, what is in the data and what is not, and how some ideas and practices fail while others survive (Rapley 2007).

Analysis also helps to identify the main parts of social life and particular perspectives that are represented in texts and to tease out themes (Potter and Wetherell 1994). In terms of narrative productions, this is how scholars can show how meanings and relationships are routinely organized and sustained through text and talk over time. Through textual analysis, we can ask questions such as the following: Who are the experts? What kind of evidence is given? Whom is the evidence compelling for? What assumptions are made? How are specific identities and communities produced? What kind of language is used? What problems are being named and constructed? Whose problem? Whose solution? In whose terms are the strategies possible? How do the texts persuade readers to care? Who does the text enable? (Bowen 2009). In turn, these questions lead us to ask broader questions about how ideas persist and in which textual spaces do these meanings thrive.

For this study, I provide a textual analysis that began with an initial reading in which I searched each publication and microblog for issues related to conflict and boundary work. And, in thinking about the history of our present (Stoler 2006), I focused on how members attended to gender and essentialism over time. For my second reading, I used QSR International's NVivo 10 software to develop narrative codes. Narrative coding makes use of primarily literary elements

and analysis onto qualitative texts (i.e., character, setting, plot, theme, form, language, point of view, conflict, and audience). The data becomes a story that describes the human experience by way of actions and interactions to achieve goals (Polkinghorne 1995). It is the messages, morals, and beliefs that are important – the metaphors and motifs for literary impact (Rubin and Rubin 1995) and to understand how storytellers went about persuading audiences through logic and emotion. Ultimately, my analysis focuses on how public narratives circulated within these feminist spaces and how these broader meanings impacted the formation of identity and community.

Finally, I used focused and pattern coding to develop themes that cross all sets of data to understand the ethnomethodological hows of these interactions. These readings and style of coding help me to develop interrelated themes, patterns of interaction, networks of relationships, and grounded theoretical constructs directly from the data. And, while “coding” might not seem queer, I utilized software to securely house the data and to position categorizations on a grid. Massumi (2002) uses the metaphor of the grid as a way to position cultural normativities like male/female, black/white, gay/straight/, and cis/trans as a way to trace the movement of meanings. In other words, when do members experience “gridlock” (Massumi 2002, 3) or attachment to essential gender? When do they resist?

Dissertation Outline

I begin with a short description of my data and follow with a summary of the three substantive chapters of this study. I reiterate my primary research question here: in this postmodern moment, as advances in technology create virtual spaces, as feminism experiences generational shifts, and as notions about gender and bodies influence the discursive and political construction of

contemporary activism and communities, how do activists preserve particular kinds of feminisms in everyday life? In chapters two, three, and four, I provide my substantive analyses of the data to reflect upon this question and to articulate the narrative productions of meaning in feminist (cyber)spaces. In my focus on the divisions between exclusionary radical-identified feminists and trans women and others, I specifically show how public narratives of gender and essentialism inform and are challenged by the stories told by members. And, through a comparison of texts, I also show how the ideas, meanings, and movements surrounding feminism, gender, essentialism, and bodies persist through the everyday coordination of talk. Chapter five reflects my overall conclusions, findings, and areas for future studies.

Chapter 2 – The Poetics of Coming Out and Being Out: Contextualizing Lesbian and Trans Women’s Narratives in Lived Communities and Online

Sociologists who treat narratives as collectively- and contextually-produced social performances have not received as much attention as other narrative scholars. However, a concentration on audiences, form, and space can offer a sociological analysis on enduring questions about inequality, power, conflict, and change. In this article, I ask: as feminist organizing moves from lived communities that organize in print to interactions online, how are narrative audiences, discursive forms of text, and spaces important for feminists as they accomplish lesbian or trans identities and communities? Data come from a historical printed newsletter by self-described radical feminists practicing lesbian separatism and two current micro-blogs, one surrounding radical-feminist narratives and the other around trans feminism. Through a textual analysis, I show how self-proclaimed radical feminists and trans feminists use poetic and emotive writing to produce different kinds of narratives about coming out and being out in different spaces and for

unique audiences. Ultimately, these discursive forms are important for communities in the production of sexual and gender identities as members' stories challenge and are impacted by public narratives of gender, essentialism, and cis- and hetero-normativity.

Chapter 3 – Framing Liberation: How Strategies of Dissent and the Focus on Oppression Differently Define Radical-Feminist (Cyber)Spaces

I analyze the radical-feminist liberation frame produced by lived communities organized by text compared with interactions online using data from a historical newsletter and current micro-blogs. I ask two primary research questions: how do cohorts of activists differently frame the same issue over time to meet their everyday needs? And, do frame disputes and different feminisms persist as organizing moves from textual publications to online spaces? Using a textual analysis, I show how liberation is framed, extended, and disputed; how frame extensions are more likely to benefit those whose lives resonant with these changes; how framing work influences how members negotiate identities, boundaries, and meaning; and how frame disputes happen as members see the movement's evolution as incompatible with effective change. Using the theory of narrative productions of meaning, I show how frames that emphasize political dissent challenge public meanings about gender and sexuality to focus on women. On the other hand, when framing strategies highlight women's relationships with men, the narratives produced are more about oppression.

Chapter 4 – The “Penis Police”: Feminist Spaces, Trans Women, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System

Using data from a historical newsletter and current micro-blogs, I provide a textual analysis to show how feminists determine gender in everyday sexualized spaces. I ask two research questions: As self-proclaimed radical feminists work toward recognition, agentic embodiment, and the safeguarding of lesbian spaces, how do members differently determine gender for insiders and outsiders in order to preserve a particular kind of radical feminism? And, as we compare textual accounts from lived communities to talk in online spaces, how does the introduction of trans women into radical-feminist spaces influence how radical-identified feminists determine gender? I show how public narratives of gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality circulate in lesbian spaces as members use the “penis police” to produce identity and community and to maintain exclusionary feminism at the expense of trans women. Using the theory of narrative productions of meaning, I expand upon the concept of determining gender to move beyond questions about how gender is socially recognized to an analysis of how gender attribution challenges or maintains the sex/gender/sexuality system.

To be sure, my interest in radical feminism is not objective. As a feminist researcher, I would not begin to attempt objectivity. I love the idea of radical change – of ripping gender out by the roots and shattering it to pieces. I admire the early work of radical feminists – abused women shelters and protesting normalized ideas of beauty – but, the seductive theories of radical, root change didn’t always pan out in practice. The idea of eliminating gender all together often equated to the practice of surveillance for members and exclusion for outsiders. And, these TERF wars seem more about fighting one another than smashing patriarchy. The stories themselves reveal that. And, this research is my attempt to understand how these divisions

continue to happen, again and again. How we, as feminists, *can* get to the root of these problems for meaningful, purposeful change. After all, these women did amazing work in their feminist contributions – I would never want to diminish that.

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**CHAPTER TWO: THE POETICS OF COMING OUT AND BEING OUT:
CONTEXTUALIZING LESBIAN AND TRANS WOMEN’S NARRATIVES
IN LIVED COMMUNITIES AND ONLINE**

Abstract

Sociologists who treat narratives as collectively- and contextually-produced social performances have not received as much attention as other narrative scholars. However, a concentration on audiences, form, and space can offer a sociological analysis on enduring questions about inequality, power, conflict, and change. In this article, I ask: as feminist organizing moves from lived communities that organize in print to interactions online, how are narrative audiences, discursive forms of text, and spaces important for feminists as they accomplish lesbian or trans identities and communities? Data come from a historical printed newsletter by self-described radical feminists practicing lesbian separatism and two current micro-blogs, one surrounding radical-feminist narratives and the other around trans feminism. Through a textual analysis, I show how self-proclaimed radical feminists and trans feminists use poetic and emotive writing to produce different kinds of narratives about coming out and being out in different spaces and for unique audiences. Ultimately, these discursive forms are important for communities in the production of sexual and gender identities as members’ stories challenge and are impacted by public narratives of gender, essentialism, and cis- and hetero-normativity.

Introduction

I venture out,
away from the clearly marked path
to explore what lies beyond.
The grass is lush and green.
The meadow fragrance
makes me dizzy with delight.
I am captivated
by a rainbow in the distance.
I run towards it
with all my might,
drawn like a magnet... - C.B. [*Womyn's Words*] (WEB May 1996)

Radical feminism is about consciousness-raising away from people in power as a way to critique patriarchy or the social and sexual dominance of women by men (Giardina 2003). Radical-identified feminists have centrally questioned the private sphere, especially sexuality, as imbued with politics. And, more generally, when lesbians practice radical feminism, women also focus on critiquing heteronormativity or the normalization of heterosexuality. But, some radical-feminists groups have positioned themselves in opposition to trans feminists or those who consider trans women's liberation to be important for the liberation of all women (Koyama 2003; here, liberation can be defined as the successful challenge to patriarchy or the social and sexual domination of women by men). However, both groups consider coming out or declaring oneself as lesbian and/or trans as crucial for the realization of self. Being out or openly lesbian and/or trans to the world also helps individuals construct communities and to take up space in a heteronormative culture, particularly when space is conceptualized as the social interactions and ways of communicating or organizing that happen between people, bodies, communities, and ideas. However, coming out and being out are two very different processes with distinctive

political implications. Likewise, the methods by which members come out and the spaces where these processes happen can become embedded with feelings of ownership, pride, and nostalgia.

But, what part does poetry and prose play in the narrative production of meaning for radical-identified lesbian feminists and trans feminists in text and online? In the documentary *After Stonewall* (Scagliotti 1999), lesbians talked about how important poetry was in connecting with other women during the movements of the 1960s and 70s. And, in the communities that formed during the 1980s and beyond, emotive writing signified the creation of history, community and identity. Likewise, the book, *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (2013), is one of the first written collectively about trans experiences. One of the contributors, trans-woman-poet Jennifer Espinoza, said, “[With poetry], it’s easier to say things that haven’t been put into words before” (Fitzpatrick 2015). Indeed, poetry and emotive writing allow trans women to counter cisnormativity and the assumption that all people are cisgender or are people who necessarily “have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, 461; this is a more recent concept unavailable to previous cohorts of feminists). And, for those who identify as radical lesbian and trans feminists, poetry is vital in the production of cultural meaning through which members have created history, community, and identity (Garber 2000). For social scientists, poetry and prose also have become increasingly valuable tools (Furman 2004). That’s because poems re-present significant moments in a non-linear way (Gannon 2001); focus emotions to recreate experience (Richardson 2002); and challenge power relationships (Clarke et al. 2005). Poetry is personal, yet communal (Furman 2004) and multivoiced (Bakhtin 1982).

Poetry and prose are two techniques used to construct narratives. Narratives can be thought of as stories that are told with a purpose – to persuade, convince, defend, describe, or to

make sense of a situation or experience (Loseke 2007). They are also a creative way to participate in claims-making used to convince audience members that their experiences are legitimate (Loseke 2003). Certainly, some audiences might see personal narratives as more compelling than scientific forms of evidence (Loseke 2000; Riessman 1993). That may be because they are shaped by the cultural context in which they emerge (Loseke 2003). Read collectively, poems and prose tell a story about what elements, people, and events are significant to particular groups of people, particularly when they oppose public narratives of cis- and heteronormativity. And, in lived communities that tell stories in print and for bloggers writing in virtual spaces, discursive forms of text produced for particular narrative audiences might become all that people can trust when it comes to feminism, identity, community, and the body and empowerment.

This leads to my primary research question: as feminist organizing moves from lived communities that organize in print to interactions online, how are narrative audiences, discursive forms of text, and spaces important for feminists as they accomplish lesbian or trans identities and communities? Data come from a 1980s-2000s printed newsletter written by self-proclaimed radical lesbian feminists practicing lesbian separatism and two current micro-blogs, one organized around radical feminism and the other around trans feminism. I provide a textual analysis to show coming-out and being-out narratives surrounding radical lesbian feminism and trans feminism make use of poetic and emotive writing. More generally, I take up Loseke's (2016) theory of the narrative productions of meaning to show how these everyday stories are impacted by and challenge broader meanings surrounding gender and essentialism.

The first part of my analysis is based on the printed newsletters collectively written by self-identified radical feminists in Western Florida. In 1982, they began meeting monthly in what

they called Salons, named after the cultural and intellectual collectives of Revolutionary France. Within the first year, Salon feminists formed the collective, Women's Energy Bank (WEB), and began publishing their newsletter, *Womyn's Words*. Over the years, the women grew together to incorporate consensus decision-making, nonviolent conflict resolution, and feminist practices and activism. They held Salon programs about coming and being out, body image, fat oppression, ageism, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, journal writing and even financial planning, technical skills, substance, addiction, relationship challenges, health, art, history, and BDSM (bondage, dominance/submission, sadomasochism). Together, they traveled to the Michigan Women's Music Festival, the Southern Women's Music Festival, Take Back the Night, Pride festivals, and other feminist and lesbian gatherings. It was in Michigan where they learned many of the ideologies they put into practice locally. They endeavored to create a special place just for lesbians. And, every year, they collectively celebrated Salon's anniversary with a birthday party to honor women.

At its height, the mailing list was over 250 subscribers, designed specifically for "womyn-born women." Some radical-identified lesbian feminists have used the term "womyn-born women" to mean "women who were born as women, who have lived their entire experience as women, and who identify as women" (Vogel 2014). And, as narratives that perpetuated patriarchy circulated in the public realm, lesbian activists saw separatism as a viable way to oppose these broader meanings. As radical-identified feminists, *Women's Words* storytellers also produced community as a way to lay claim to textual spaces as a way to forge resistant political and cultural networks of women. However, as the community grew to over 65, members concentrated on weaving together the burgeoning literature about radical feminism with their own stories to create a livable and workable community for its members. Ultimately, however, as

trans women attempted to join the community and as the broader feminist movement migrated online, WEB disbanded in the early 2000s.

Narratives, Audiences, and Discursive Forms

Narratives are instruments of ideology, forms of discourse, and important components of collective action frames, which can be identified in text by their characters, plot, and audiences (Riessman 1993). In particular, the autobiographical story is important for understanding expressions of identity (McAdams 2001) and, when emotionally moved by the plight of the narrator, audience members are intensely persuaded by the author's claims (Loseke 2011). In constructing a successful claim about a particular experience (Loseke 2003), audiences must also take seriously the claims made about why these identities and communities are needed in the first place. And, choosing to appeal to one perceived audience over the other also has various theoretical and political implications in how identities and communities are eventually constructed (Crawley 2002). Done collectively, authors elaborate, challenge, and revise how they narrate who they are based on what kinds of audiences with whom they intend to communicate (Prins et al. 2013). Some, for instance, might use emotions to motivate participation, prompt a sense of belonging, and craft an alternative world in which characters feel love and pride (Jasper 2011). And, in developing the concept of collective narrative, researchers refer to a collection of stories told by group members with similar themes (Plummer 2001). While many scholars have distinguished between narratives and stories (Maines 2001), I follow those who use the terms interchangeably to emphasize discursive form context, and audiences (see Polletta et al. 2011).

Early on, Rabinowitz (1977) suggested that “narrative audience[s are] much like ourselves, with our beliefs, prejudices, our hopes, fears, and expectations, and our knowledge of

society and literature – unless there is some evidence (textual or historical) to the contrary” (128-29). Narrative audiences may believe that the characters are real and that the narrative is a history. How the story is told and in which context is significant for which characters, events, and forms the narrator chooses to emphasize as meanings are produced in interaction. In the end, however, people typically conform to the stories that are expected of them (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Loseke 2001). But, without the resources needed to conform, self-acclaimed lesbians and trans women alike can take on the work of producing their own identity and community narratives to particular kinds of audiences. For instance, this is how the radical-feminist process of consciousness-raising helps participants tell a “herstory” that did not previously exist. In this sense, texts become a mechanism for coordinating people’s doings as people attempt to write themselves into being.

Sociologists have treated narratives more as texts to be analyzed for their meaning rather than as social performances interactively-constructed and collectively-heard and -assessed by audiences (Polletta et al. 2011). The latter is a form of narrative analysis which draws on diverse methods like ethnography, comparative historical research, discourse analysis, and conversation analysis and focuses on the study of narratives in the contexts of their telling. Scholars doing this type of analysis have not received as much attention as others who study the self in relationship to narratives or narrative as a mode of analysis (Ewick and Silbey 1995). And, while narrative is typically thought of as a sequence of events (Page et al. 2013), the linear model of chronological time does not account well for the human experience nor for the ways in which the human experience is narrated (Mishler 2006). People often tell stories that are fragmented, fluid, and reiterated over time. In poetry and prose, time can also become “braided,” where the beginning, the middle, and the end are wound around and circle back onto one another (Clarke et al. 2005).

Stories unfold over repeated interactions, the teller and audiences negotiate the meaning of the story, and power is unevenly distributed based on the experience of the author (Polletta et al. 2011). In this sense, we can see how communities, like the collective stories they tell, do not merely end, but carry on in meaning.

When it comes to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) life, coming out is among the most-widely theorized about aspects of Western lives (Zimman 2009) – perhaps the most widely utilized narrative. Under heteronormativity, the practice of revealing stigmatized sexual desires is considered pivotal for realizing a LGBT self. Over the past three decades scholars have studied sexualities and continue to point out the limitations of an emphasis on the closet as a typified experience (Seidman et al. 1999). Others have criticized the way the closet reinforces the binary between gay and straight (Sedgwick 1990). However, a concentration on narrative audiences, form, and space can provide analytic purchase on enduring sociological questions about inequality, power, conflict, and change. That is one of my goals here. By concentrating on the poetry feminists write in accomplishing identity and community, I also show how this experience is not generalizable across LGBT communities.

Method

This study depends on the phenomenological, constructionist, symbolic interactionist theory of narrative productions of meaning in the public realm (Loseke 2016). This theory centers not solely on those narratives used in sensemaking (Maines 2001) or those stories people write and tell about themselves (Baker 1996; Godwin 2004), but even more so on how public narratives circulate within and are challenged by these stories. Indeed, stories that disseminate in the public realm resemble small stories in that they are composed of scenes, plots, and characters, and

contain moral lessons. Unlike small stories, however, socially-circulating stories typically have multiple authors and are constantly challenged and modified in response to other narratives, current events, and cultural change (Loseke 2016). But, by connecting the stories that flow through the social world via text, blogs, and so forth with broader meanings, researchers can better understand how communication is widely understood by diverse audiences and how it reflects, perpetuates, and/or challenges shared ways of thinking. After all, it is through this connection that we can see how ideas surrounding gender, essentialism, and cis- and heteronormativity, for example, are used to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and moralities over time in order to tell different stories. It is through this method that we can also see how other aspects of narrative productions surrounding these concepts circulate unchallenged to perpetuate ideas about bodies, boundaries, and exclusion. Here, texts arise as activist objects in relationship to their work and in their distinctive relations with the surrounding social world (Smith 1990b). As analysts, we must locate the controlling frameworks and interpretive schemata provided by those social relations to understand the intention of the texts and how distinctive methods of telling are grounded in lived actuality (Smith 1990b).

Previously taken-for-granted meanings are challenged within the context of a more globalized and socially-fragmented world, where what we know is increasingly mediated (Loseke 2016). Swidler (1986) calls these “unsettled times” or those historical moments when something happens in the world that compels people to either re-orient themselves or to push for change or order. Yet, given this fragmentation, communication remains more or less understandable to audiences and communities with diverse world views, practical experiences, and moral values. This requires a rethinking of culture as the “historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols” (Geertz 1973, 89). This definition allows us to better describe

the connections between cultural meanings and action. This formulation also offers an image of culture as a “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views that people can use in varying configurations to solve problems, strategize, and to construct identities, movements, and communities (Swidler 1986, 273). It also allows for an analysis of how ways of ordering and action are persistent through time and space.

In order to expand upon this idea of culture, Loseke (2016) explores how the more-or-less widely shared systems of meaning in “symbolic codes” and “emotion codes” are incorporated into narratives. Symbolic codes are systems of *thinking* that people can use to construct narrative scenes, plots, characters and morals. In particular, symbolic codes have the potential to persuade audiences through appeals to logic as they refer to those interlocking systems of meaning about how the world works, how the world should work, and of expected rights, responsibilities, and relationships. These codes tell audiences what is believable and what is important. But, because effective persuasion speaks to both minds and hearts, appeals to logic alone are not sufficient (Loseke 2016). Emotion is also a necessary component in producing effective communication (Altheide 2002; Richards 2004; Waddell 1990). As a result, Loseke (2016) defines “emotion codes” as the expectations, standards, and ideals surrounding emotion that inform ideas about when, where, and toward whom or what emotions should be experienced, expressed, responded to, and evaluated. These codes refer to cultural ways of *feeling*. And, as members seek out stories to make sense of their troubles and community change (Frank 1995; Plummer 1995), the cultural codes used can eventually become the yardsticks by which members morally evaluate themselves and others (Baker 1996; Wood and Rennie 1994). In other words, these codes can also become “tied down” (Schudson 1989) and embedded within spaces (Fischer

2003; Stone 1997) so that communities may not survive ruptures between narratives and local actions.

Textual or document analysis is a suitable technique for this analysis as it requires that data be examined and interpreted so as to draw out meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge about the broader world (Atkinson and Coffey 1997; Bowen 2009; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Diamond 2006; Rapley 2007; Smith 1990a, b, 2001; Ng 1995). And, in a comparative analysis of historical and contemporary texts, a textual analysis helps to describe the trajectory of narratives so as to show how they are produced over time. Analysis specifically focuses on how ideas, practices, and identities, emerge, transform, mutate, and become the relatively durable things we take for granted (Rapley 2007). Textual analysis also encourages us to think about how the data is organized, what is in the data and what is not, and how some ideas and practices fail while others survive (Rapley 2007).

Data

Before I describe the data sets used in this study, it is important to note how a comparative textual analysis of feminist newsletters and interactive blogs is important in understanding the context in which narratives are produced. Feminist newsletters stemmed from the 1970s women's movement and created a space for activists to write about potentially sensitive issues in safety for an audience of fellow activists. While mainstream media outlets were not always sympathetic to feminist pursuits, the newsletter allowed communities to organize under consensus-based processes in which all members could participate. Newsletters became beloved members of the community. And, much like the exchange of feminist newsletters and zines, online textual networks like blogs also contribute to feminist organizing

and the dissemination of feminist ideologies, goals, and strategies (Crossley 2015). Bloggers write for large, diverse, and mostly unknown audiences through back-and-forth conversations that are situated amid a virtual sphere that can be hostile to feminist ideas. Online storytellers are also attuned to concepts and theories like intersectionality and white privilege that were still being developed in the 1980s. Both, however, provide members with a kind of instruction manual for how to practice and talk about feminism locally and online.

My analysis focuses on the coming-out and being-out narratives produced by self-described radical lesbian and trans feminists and how these stories are challenge and are impacted by broader meanings about gender, essentialism, and cis- and hetero-normativity. I use data I collected in a university's Special Collections – *Womyn's Words* (dates 05/1983 to 04/2013: 3,554 pages) and two Tumblr micro-blogs #radicalfeminism (472 pages) and #transfeminism (163 pages) gathered in 2015. Tumblr fulfills several criteria outlined by Boellstorff et al. (2012) for a virtual ethnography in that it is multi-user, shared, persistent, and constantly evolving. Tumblr is also where the conflict between radical feminism and trans women is manifesting and makes up another cohort of activists. For each data set, I relied on my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB)'s decision that this data is considered public and does not need IRB approval. However, I because *Womyn's Words* represents a small, local community, I chose to use given aliases or initials to distinguish between authors. If no author name was given, I leave that information out. And, while Tumblr bloggers are required to create a username and password to post comments, they do not need one to observe. Here, I use usernames – if provided – to distinguish between authors. During the analysis, I used QSR International's NVivo 10 software to develop narrative codes about characters, plots, settings, themes, conflict, audience, and so forth. In this sense, the data become a story that describes the

human experience by ways of symbolic and emotion codes used to achieve goals for specific audiences (Loseke 2016; Polkinghorne 1995).

The Politics of Belonging and Home: Coming Out as Lesbian and Feminist

The centering of lesbian identity is evident in the historical ideas brought to life by the phrase “coming out.” This phrase is meant to suggest that the process of self-declaring oneself as a lesbian is a revelation or a process of discovery or admission that is not allowed under heteronormativity. In the United States, feminist theorizing about lesbian identities began with the idea that the personal is political. As an outgrowth of the 1960s and 1970s women’s liberation movement and lesbian political movement, feminist collections of personal narratives are also extensions of the process of consciousness-raising. This framework was used to think about lesbianism as “feminist theory in action” (Abbott and Love 1973, 136) and as a privileging of women and, therefore, of oneself. In other words, coming-out narratives for people who identify as both lesbian and radical feminist are much different than for those identifying with one category. While the telling of sexual selves for LGB people is seen as “the last step in overcoming social stigma and moving toward leading a healthy ‘normal’ life” (Crawley and Broad 2004, 49), the characters in these feminist coming out stories are embarking on a life-long journey in which the plot ebbs and flows around preserving feminist mobilization.

In lived communities that organize in print, members shared their coming out stories with a closed-circuit of other lesbians. Some members wrote that coming out meant “to let our families, friends and those we encounter in our daily lives know our truths/realities and, in so doing, validate our wholeness” - N. (WEB March 1987). However, some wrote that they were “still not out at my job because it would mean being fired” - L.L. (WEB February 1995). In the

time frame in which early editions of *Womyn's Words* were produced, coming out and being out were two different processes. More specifically, coming out might mean to declare your sexual identity to yourself and to those closest to you while not necessarily "being out" in public. Here, even when members felt "shy," Salon-goers were "welcome to listen to other womyn's stories without any pressure to tell your own" (WEB July 1990). In this space, coming out was the first step in which members declared themselves to one another using *Womyn's Words* as a way to coordinate these stories in a separate space. One Salon feminist writes:

Coming Out

To be among my sisters
Give a new dimension to myself.
To be where I belong
Can't be compared
With anything on earth.
A realization of a self
Lost in a stranger world
Who found a place
To be fulfilled and rest.
I search my entire life
Among different dimensions
All of them enriched me
Preparing me for this occasion.
I knew very early in life.
That I was different
And I fought with all my heart
What I thought was strange and
Only when I allowed myself to
drift free in those tumultuous
waters,
I was carried away by nature
To the mystic oasis.
It was meant to be mine
And the happiness and peace
I felt, assured me
That the search was over.
I was at last home! – V. (WEB August 1983)

Salon feminists evoked narratives of wholeness and belonging in their stories of coming out to a secluded, lesbian-centered audience. And, while belonging is about emotional attachment (Ignatieff 2001), belonging becomes political when members understand these feelings as threatened in some way. These stories challenged broader emotion codes in how members expanded what was considered to be acceptable ways of experiencing and expressing feelings toward other women. But, by also making the everyday connection between coming out and patriarchy, members also challenged the language available to feminists in making claims. In developing their own heroines, morals, plots, and scenes, members also expanded the available symbolic codes or ways of thinking about lesbian lives. Indeed, members used metaphors about narrative space in their textual descriptions of Salon as “a land of Oz – a place where women could laugh and play and be true to themselves... a warm embrace... home” (WEB August 2003) in order to take up space amid heteronormativity. Narratives countered those of “the closet” in which participants write of the pain of aloneness and identity fragmentation, even if Salon feminists were not necessarily “out” in public spaces. As a result, the symbolic and emotion codes that were developed in text stuck to the spaces of Salon and *Womyn’s Words* as members asserted a kind of moral ownership through the conceptualization of home.

“For its True Name is Love”: How Members Use Nostalgia and Home

If patriarchy moved members to organize, then poetic writing allowed Salon feminists to challenge public narratives about gender and sexuality and to challenge power relationships through a collective coming out and eventual being out. In print, revealing the “truth” of one’s lesbianism is not only connected to an unburdening of personal and self-destructive lies, but also with the connection of individual selves to collective and historical ones through performance.

The latter has political implications in the sense that members are, once again, taking up space previously occupied by heteronormative gender. One Salon feminist wrote:

Deep Inside/Please Look

Please begin to look
deep inside
don't be afraid
of what you'll find
beneath the brainwashed surface
of your mind

I can see what you feel
(you can't deny what shows in your eyes)
It has survived
since the Amazon gays
through the dark ages
and the Puritan days

It cannot be destroyed
but it can be denied
You're only cheating yourself
if it stays hidden inside.

It's been smothered by fear
and hate and lies
through centuries on earth
it's had to wear a disguise

But it's time to come out now
let not hate and fear prevail
for its true name is love; and
it will not fail – C.W. (WEB January 1984)

It is important to note that the narratives which centered around characters like the Amazons or fantasy worlds tend to romanticize the tribal cultures that have been marginalized under advanced capitalism and colonization. While these narratives may be a way to create “imagined communities” (Crowley 1999) and a sense of space that is an “oasis,” the idea of the free lesbian tribe may be modeled after a nostalgic vision of something that may have never happened. These narratives also speak to the feminist goal of rewriting the center to suit

particular (but not all) identities, rather than living and thriving in the margins. To be fair, this style of telling is not limited to Salon feminists at the time. Concepts like intersectionality and white privilege were not yet circulating within the burgeoning literature. Indeed, the practice of prioritizing sexism is also found in works like Rich's (1980) forward to *The Coming Out Stories*. However, these narratives also manifest in the idea that lesbians are "better feminists" than straight, bisexual, or otherly-defined women and in how problems like racism, classism, and other systems of discrimination were not widely addressed among "women-identified women" (Phelan 1993).

Here, however, poems were not only about a single heroine, but were also about other members who were equally important. In this sense, Salon feminists used *Womyn's Words* as a way to organize a communal coming out and to encourage others to be out using the symbolic and emotion that were still being developed. And, while coming out and being out were certainly seen as the road toward happiness and feeling "whole," it was also viewed as a way to not let "hate and fear prevail." But, as these processes begin to appear naturalized over time, these methods of coming out and being out are more of an interactional way for the community to offer up a lineage that defies the prescriptions or "brainwash[ings]" (WEB January 1984) of normative femininity and enables members to rewrite a future based on these revelations. And, as a way to resist these components of heteronormative culture, Salon feminists often evoked notions of "home." While imperfect, lesbian "idylls" or utopias have been used historically as a way to rework dominant spaces and to question the norms of heterosexuality through opposition (Browne 2011).

Americans often feel nostalgia and sentimentality about home; however, when one's family home, neighborhoods, and even public, hangout spaces feel hostile, marginalized

communities create their own homes and spaces. For Salon feminists, home was constructed through the coming- and being-out narratives were coordinated through *Womyn's Words* and performed in-person at Salon. Members also celebrated *Womyn's Words* anniversaries and Salon "birthdays" through poetry.

The Beginning of Home

It was seven years ago
when we walked into that room.
We were the new womyn in town then
Curious, excited, and desperate for the company
of womyn.

A woman at the bookstore
had told us about Salon
so we drove across the bridge
walked into that room
and we knew, then, that we had found them.
"Whew, beebee," she said to me
with relief in her eyes.
"there are dykes in Florida."

A week later we again
made that trip across the bridge...
It was the beginning of family.
It was the beginning of home.

...I grew into separatism and let this place
to grow in other ways.

...There are reasons for everything
they say.
There must be reasons I went away
and reasons I returned
And, most important,
there are reasons why I love you.
You're strong and brave
Feisty and powerful
Intelligent and gentle
supportive and challenging
I can grow here, in this soil,
fed by the energy in this room,
watered by the tears we shed together,

nurtured again and again by your affection.
You were each a star to guide me
Home to you. where I belong – K.W. (WEB June 1990)

This poem was written to “commemorate the 7th anniversary of my first Salon meeting...” and as “a gift to the community, to the family I have here, as a reminder of how special we are.” While American narratives often tell of personal sacrifice and individualism, Salon feminists weaved collective narratives embedded in particular spaces and written for specific audiences through metaphors of “home.” These poems assume an audience who understands the coming-out and being-out experiences as positive and empowering – an experience that helped to create a body of knowledge about identifying as a lesbian and a radical feminist under heteronormativity. As Goulding (1999) writes, “Nostalgia is more than just memory; it is memory with the pain taken away. It involves a bittersweet longing for an idealized past which no longer exists” (2). It is also a reaction against the instabilities and perceived flaws of the present. Even though, “[t]here must be reasons I went away,” conflicts at Salon and in the pages of *Womyn’s Words* were often quieted as memories of a “supportive” and “nurture[ing]” family and home won out for those who were included in this space.

Over the years, Salon feminists also experienced the backlash that came alongside the Reagan administration and the fervent abortion debates of the 1990s that refocused issues of the body in the movement. Members also watched as feminists switched up their mobilizations strategies to include online organizing. D. wrote:

The world is becoming more open, informal and connection to events more accessible... Salon, in the beginning was a unique forum and meeting place. There were few places for women to interact. Through Salon, people gained friends who formed changing and expanding networks... It would be preferable to have Salon continue in some form that fulfills a present need. It is also imperative that women wanting to see this continue become involved to some degree. Those who carried the burden for others to enjoy all those years have served so remarkably well and they need relief. Whatever evolves,

Salon has been a wonderful, enriching, powerful, meaning[ful] force in so many lives. And those who began it and maintained it for so long deserve our deepest gratitude - D. (WEB October 2000).

In the face of change, Salon feminists' fear of invisibility meant that members solidified their boundaries, including those around lived and textual spaces. After all, it is in print and for an audience of lesbian separatists that members expanded the available symbolic and emotion codes used to counter public narratives about gender and sexuality. As a result, even as *Womyn's Words* advertised a Salon planned by "Girl Geeks [who] will take you through the several interesting computer processes, photo restoration, web design, auction sites, and more!" (WEB August 2001), members mourned the loss of the printed newsletter. The emotional connections to the past can fuel the maintenance of boundary work as identities become transitional. This can set up lines between "us" and "them" whether it is in terms of space, form, or audiences which can be fueled by essentialism. If coming out and being out are tied to the particular sexual identities of lesbian and cis women, then members may not know how to communicate to more open audiences whose perceived oppressions might be different. Indeed, when members preface "expressing my true self" in "the most important journey I could have gone on" with "[t]he search for my self in a male-oppressive world" - D.J. (WEB May 1997), they connect coming out with a particular kind of feminism that prioritizes those who were assigned female at birth. This becomes their collective story of triumph with heroines who made the journey possible. It also reveals how public narratives of gender and essentialism circulate within these seemingly closed spaces in order to make sense of community troubles.

Previous and emerging generations often react against the accelerating technical social and cultural changes taking place by tying themselves to the masts of the yesteryears. And, with nostalgia can also come the unwillingness to change. Over the years, the newsletter was in

danger of discontinuing four times due to lack of participation in its production. In response, members evoked nostalgia and textual uniqueness to rally support: “Our community now has countless websites and schlepsites... But there is only one *Womyn’s Words* – please support our community’s printed world. When it’s gone – it’s gone” (WEB April 2008). Here, the heroines of the past are asserted into the narrative so that time becomes braided and any conflicts or problems of the past are erased. *Womyn’s Words* moved online in 2011 after its publication was taken over by a third party. It was published until 2013.

Tumblr as the Entry Point for Understanding Radical Feminism Online

Social media (e.g., Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) is the starting point many activists now use to launch into various virtual worlds. The microblogging site, Tumblr, is where the conflict between self-described radical and trans feminists is manifesting and makes up another cohort of activists (see Goldberg 2014 and Loza 2014). Microblogging is a type of blogging in which users write about themselves and send updates to friends and followers. At the time of this project, there were roughly 163.9 million blogs and 72 billion posts on Tumblr. 1) 31% of all visitors are in the U.S; 2) the average user visits about 67 pages every month; 3) Tumblr is most popular with 18-to-29 year olds; 4) 16% of Tumblr visitors are Latino, 13% are Black, and 14% are white – data about other racial groups was unavailable; 5) 51% of U.S. users identify as male, while most of the other 49% does not identify in terms of sex or gender (Costill 2014). Unlike social media networks like Facebook, however, Tumblr bloggers adopt pseudonyms to hide their offline identities behind unique usernames in a way that often prevents in-person interactions (Hart 2015). And, given that virtual spaces are massive, diverse, and mostly unknown to any particular storyteller, narrative productions happen in constant completion with other stories.

The data set #radicalfeminism was gathered in 2015 on Tumblr and comprises all the micro-blogs organized by this hashtag. Observers read Tumblr in reverse order and, unless removed by Tumblr, users see all posts, which appear as a communal stream of consciousness organized by self-identifying hashtags. While Twitter has a short length limitation for posts, Tumblr does not. Tumblr also supports multimedia posts like images, audios, and videos. Bloggers can post from anywhere at any time and “follow” one another, reblog one another’s post, click on a link to that user’s larger blog housed on another site, and make notes about others posts. While it is impossible to determine whether or not these bloggers also identify as cis women, their overall perspectives about trans women identify them as overwhelmingly “trans exclusionary.” While I analyzed #radicalfeminism in an attempt to connect print narratives with those appearing online, I found that Tumblr bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism no longer make use of poetry and prose.

“It’s Not All About “Genitals””: Narratives and Audiences in Online Spaces

“[F]ollow[ing] all the lesbian feminists... on Tumblr” and “learning about other women’s sexuality” situates #radicalfeminism as a space for bloggers to theorize about political lesbianism. This creates new possibilities in online spaces for members to reach across boundaries to make new affiliations, identifications, and alliances. “Following” and “sharing” also spreads a feminist perspective into dominant discourse and spaces. However, apart from posts quoting scholars like Adrienne Rich in which users like femalestevebuscemi write that “[t]he assumption that ‘most women are innately heterosexual’ stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for many women,” I found only one post in which a blogger self-identifies as a lesbian. In it, ruthgreenb writes:

And as a lesbian, I much prefer women. This is not about genitals. But I simply much prefer being with women. I prefer how they think, behave and treat me as another woman. I don't want the casual sexism that men routinely display. I love women. And yes I love sex with women too. I am not interested in penis in vagina sex. I love making love to a woman and having her make love to me in return.

To simply talk about lesbianism as if it was all about genitals, shows a deep lack of understanding of what it actually means to be a lesbian.

Ruthgreenb moves into a discussion of sex and how bodies and acts are important for the production of sexual identities, a topic that was rarely broached in the pages of *Womyn's Words*. However, other bloggers write about the “vagina [as] the part of us that men want to penetrate” (genderheretic). Indeed, rather than centering women's relationships to one another in this space, this post appears to focus on women's destructive connections with men through the essential body. So, while past efforts in producing narratives were all about using text to create and organize coming-out and being-out narratives for one another, the transference of radical feminism online could mean that #radicalfeminism is merely about lesbians rather than for lesbians.

Indeed, in lived communities organized by text, narratives were produced using emotive and poetic stories meant to topple the dominant narratives that perpetuated heteronormativity. While discussions of sex were glaringly missing, narratives did produce a sexual identity for the community. Online, however, audiences vary across lines of gender and sexualities and, as a result, these particular feminists rely on the theories of scholars like Andrea Dworkin to appeal to audiences using logic or academic heroines and those narrative scenes, plots, and morals that depend on broader symbolic codes. On #radicalfeminism, hepburnedsuntorytime quotes Dworkin's *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politic*:

And what are we to think? Because if we begin to piece together all of the instances of violence—the rapes, the assaults, the crippings, the killings, the mass slaughters; if we read their novels, poems, political and philosophical tracts and see that they think of us

today what the Inquisitors thought of us yesterday; if we realize that historically gynocide is not some mistake, some accidental excess, some dreadful fluke, but is instead the logical consequence of what they believe to be our god-given or biological natures; then we must finally understand that under patriarchy gynocide is the ongoing reality of life lived by women...

Here, the only reference to poetry is placed in the hands of the “Inquisitors.” And, interestingly, what is missing in this quote is the next sentence in this passage in which Dworkin (1982) writes, “...then we must look to each other—for the courage to bear it and for the courage to change it” (19). In virtual spaces where audiences are open and unknown, it seems that bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism make use of academic theories as a way to convince, defend, and legitimize the claims about women’s oppression by men. What is not there, however, is the call for feminists to form communities and emotional connections based on these experiences. And, as the interactions are not based on the lesbian processes of coming out and being out, poetry or emotional experiences are not relevant. Conversely, in smaller, lived communities organized in print, where the audience was familiar, all women, and primarily self-identified lesbians, members theorized from their own experiences in which the codes or elements, people, and events were significant to them. There, the focus was on women’s relationships and poetry became a way to actively participate in claims-making for a community-oriented audience.

To be sure, Salon feminists also focused on bodies and, more specifically genitals (see chapter four). However, it was perhaps how they challenged public narratives about certain aspects of gender and sexuality that was so attractive to the trans women who attempted to join, but who were ultimately excluded. Online, however, the focus is on the unequal relationship between those who were assigned female at birth and those who were assigned male. This sets up Tumblr as more of a space of conflict or a battleground in which discursive wars are enacted. For instance, one trans women, user tonidorsay, wrote over a dozen posts and asserted images of

her face and body in the radicalfeminism hashtag. This created a visceral experience online and became a way for members to construct alternative meanings in an integrated space. However, it also means that as trans women use virtual spaces to come out and be out, they are creating their own hashtags rather than joining up with other kinds of feminists.

Tumblr as the Entry Point for Understanding Trans Feminism Online

Activists in the transgender movement point to the Internet as a harbinger of productive growth for the movement. Social media and blogging in particular have allowed people to make contacts in urban and rural areas, to educate themselves and others, and to mobilize without ever having to come out in public as trans (Shapiro 2008). Compared to printed newsletters, anyone can contribute in an unedited format, which makes Tumblr a particularly attractive space for collective theories of feminism to flourish. For trans women, in particular, Tumblr is a kind of hashtag feminism that allows those who were previously silenced to broaden and radically redefine feminism online.

Once again, this data set was gathered in 2015 on Tumblr and comprises all the micro-blogs organized by the hashtag transfeminism. Readers cannot tell whether or not bloggers who post on #transfeminism identify as trans or cis; however, the overall ideas and theories used situate this hashtag as “trans inclusive.” While self-described radical and trans feminists often find themselves on opposite sides of the exclusion/inclusion debates and generally create their own spaces, the two groups are similarly theorizing about their coming-out and being-out experiences in terms of discursive form. Both groups use poetry to form narratives about these processes and to collectively and emotionally appeal to their audiences. This is how they undermine essentialism and normativities by being out. However, when trans women come out

online in these spaces, they make (and have always made) connections with cis and trans women of any sexual orientation.

Changing up Audiences, Recentering the Body: Trans-Feminist Narratives Online

Like other kinds of feminists, trans-identified feminists carry the double burden of a complicated coming out and being out processes. Coming out does not mean that a happy, “normal” life is the end of the journey in which they are accepted by the world. It is about actively sharing stories to understand community issues. On #transfeminism, vilaniaminha, writes:

From my own personal analysis and conversations with fellow trans women I’ve seen how complicated our lives are and my personal theory is that we internalize things at a deep subconscious level based on our true identities. This leads to how often times people can sense something different about us before we come out. Or how often we share experiences with cis women.

While there has been an insurgence of trans organizations over the past 40 years and remaining in the closet is not as common than it used to be, it can still be difficult for trans people to be publicly out. Just as trans women may identify as women, some may be perceived of as men. For others, whose gender may align with how others perceive them, coming out and being out means revealing a gender history that describes crossing social boundaries. This shifts the audiences in that the narrator assumes her readers already have a complicated gender history of their own, whether trans or cis. Unlike feminists coming out and being out in separatist print spaces, bloggers posting on #transfeminism articulate a connection across the lines of cis and trans to expand symbolic boundaries and to blur the lines between “us” and “them.” On #transfeminism, smith-q-and-a, also writes:

How to Love a Trans Woman

If she offers you breastbone
Aching to carve soft fruit from its branches
Though there may be more tissue in the lining of her bra
Than the flesh that rises to meet it
Let her ripen in your hands.
Imagine if she'd lost those swells to cancer,
Diabetes,
A car accident instead of an accident of genetics
Would you think of her as less a woman then?
Then think of her as no less one now

Tumblr bloggers on #transfeminism like smith-q-and-a draw on narratives of the affected and disruptive body to interrogate and disrupt the gender system (Koyama 2003). And, this particular passage also approaches sex in a way that Salon and stories on #radicalfeminism largely did not. This centers narratives on the desire for “wholeness,” but, in addition, highlights issues of the non-essential body as important for feminism. Once again, this way of writing expands upon existing symbolic and emotion codes to make room for trans women in how feminists talk about their experiences and in the connections they form. Smith-q-and-a also makes a particular claim connecting her body with those who have had cancer, diabetes, or suffered through a car accident as a way to assert legitimacy in her claim that trans concerns are important in both the personal and political. Given the historical progression of feminist literature on the body, it makes sense that these issues are particularly salient in trans narratives. Body management becomes a part of how women constrain and discipline their bodies to align with normative constructs of femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987). As a result, while the coming out process may be nostalgically empowering for cis feminists, bloggers posting on #transfeminism write about a gender history in which the body is troubled. In turn, this also troubles the coming out process as audiences are seen as both empathetic in terms of their own troubled gender history and potentially antagonistic to trans issues. Indeed, Salon feminists

certainly troubled public narratives about certain aspects of gender and essentialism as these stories related to lesbian lives. However, trans feminists are not only expanding these narratives even further, but are also integrating themselves as narrative heroines in feminist history in a way that legitimizes their own ways of thinking and feeling.

A note on the “wrong body” model is also important here. This model used to describe the experiences of trans people depends on the idea that there is a “misalignment between gender and the sexed body” (Bettcher 2014). The weak version describes a medical condition called transsexuality and then, through surgery, a person becomes a woman. The strong version claims that a person has always been a woman or man and is, therefore, “trapped in the wrong body.” However, neither model addresses how trans women experience both sexual oppression as women and transphobia as trans. While we might read the narratives above as residual stories resulting from ideas about a naturalized identity and the medicalization of bodies, I read them as feminist interrogation of difference. Rather than living stealthy or writing about their experiences as either women or as trans, both write for blended narrative audiences to challenge how we think about identities and bodies. If cisnormativity holds all women to the impossible standards of normative femininity, then trans women exemplify the troubled history between these notions and individual bodies. If cis and trans women alike are oppressed by systems of sexism, racism, and capitalism causing illness, etc., then these systems can also oppress women because they are trans, causing aloneness and rejection.

“It is Time for a Feminism of the Monstrous”: Trans-Feminist Narratives Online

Like those posting on #radicalfeminism, bloggers on #transfeminism also make references to theorists of the past and present. For instance, pulangpluma, quotes Susan Stryker

(2011)'s "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix" by writing that "I defy th[e] Law in my refusal to abide by [gender's] original decree... Though I may not hold the stylus myself, I can move beneath it for my own deep self-sustaining pleasures." In her essay, Stryker finds a deep affinity with the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* who also often feels less than human. Because of her contradictory embodiment and exclusion from other communities, Stryker directs her rage against the institutions under which she must exist. Bloggers writing on #transfeminism carry on these narratives to virtually embody the monster. Again, this is how the plot ebbs and flows and how trans-identified feminists develop collective narratives with calls to action. And, whereas stories posted on #radicalfeminism rely on a recognizable essential body and almost exclusively on logic, those on #transfeminism obliterate the recognizable body to also take up ways of feeling. On #transfeminism, rocknrollfeminist, writes:

It is time to look the monstrous in the eye. It is time. It is time to say that we are beautiful in our fierceness, and that we are our own. We are not the rejected of what we can never be. We are what we were meant to be. We are not pieces of wholes thrown together incorrectly. We are not mistakes

Given that Tumblr is one of the spaces in which the conflicts between radical feminism and trans women rage on, it is also important to note the historical manifestation of the monstrous as connected with trans women. Radical-identified feminist, Daly (1989) makes the connection explicit in "Boundary Violation and the Frankenstein Phenomenon" in which she writes about trans women as the agents of a "necrophilic invasion" of female space (69-72). Raymond (1979) also echoes Frankenstein's feelings toward the monster when she says that "the problem of transsexuality would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence." It is commonplace in literature to equate Frankenstein's monster with all the author cannot accept in

herself. If cis women, particularly lesbians and bisexual women, project experiences of nonconformity onto the Frankenstein, then the monster is perpetually resigned to the margins. Some feminists have mobilized around transforming the center, even if through separatism. Trans feminists, on the other hand, construct narratives of finding agency along the edges.

Frankenstein's power over everyday life, like that of cisnormativity's power over trans women, is reflected in the body and in the ability to speak about these issues. However, from the margins, rocknrollfeminist (above) writes through an empowered, yet imperfect body about trans women's experiences. On #transfeminism, L.L., also writes:

I am not a woman trapped in a man's body. This body is no man's; it is mine, it is me, and there is no man in that equation. And I am not trapped in it. There are a million and one ways out of this body, and I have clung to it, tooth and claw, despite an endless line of people and institutions who would rather I vacate the premises, and have sometimes been willing to make me bleed to convince me they're right.

This body is mine, and I claim it and its bruises, and it is not a man's, and I am not trapped here. I have looked leaving my body in the eye and I have said, in the end, hell no. There is too much to do, too much to love, too many who need one more of us to say hell no and help them say the same. It is time for a feminism of the monstrous

Through these narratives, we see how the coming-out and being-out processes are continuous for those who also identify as feminists. Indeed, some feminists are particularly concerned with trans women and the idea of male privilege (Stryker 2011). This idea posits that trans women are socialized as boys and thus cannot empathize with the experiences of cis girls and women. Trans feminists, however, reject the common response to reject the idea of male privilege, even for trans women. Many trans women have "passed" as men at some point in their lives and may have been privileged during employment, education, or other interactions. Instead, trans-identified feminists reject the wrong-body model to focus on the acceptance of a complex gender history as centered in the body. As a result, self-proclaimed trans feminists write about their

experiences as complex interactions the disadvantage of being trans, the oppression felt from living as an adult woman, and their experiences with male privilege. By writing that she is “not trapped in a man’s body,” L.L. begins to construct a narrative of difference through poetic writing for narrative audiences that may also be privileged in some ways, while oppressed in others. She also turns public and feminist narratives about essentialism on their head as she claims the imperfect body so physically affected by patriarchy in order to disrupt the institution from her position in the margins.

Another way to create interactive conversations on Tumblr is the “Ask Box” function. Each blog has an ask box where users can ask bloggers questions and, if they so choose, remain anonymous. Here, one user answers the anonymous question, “How can a woman have such a protruding adam’s apple?” In response, one #transfeminism blogger writes:

this is where i keep my courage
i do what few could do
this is where i keep my song
a voice that changes hearts
this is where i keep my strength
i swallow all your hate
this is where i keep my love
a place where lips can rest
and if my body’s strange to you
its only cause you lack the joy
of knowing me like before

If the story of Frankenstein’s is about rejection and the fantasy of revenge, then the narratives produced on #transfeminism are about accepting that rejection and turning toward feminism in order to find personal redemption through the body. However, while self-identified radical feminists were declaring a particular sexual identity, storytellers posting on #transfeminism are telling gender stories through poetic writing. “[I]f my body’s strange to you its only cause you lack the joy of knowing me like before,” then these narratives are also about proclaiming a

particular gender history. There is not a clear delineation between being in the closet and coming out or being out and both experiences are valuable in the narrator's journey toward becoming a feminist, no matter how painful. The feminist journey is just beginning and, for #transfeminism bloggers, it seems that these stories are also about finding emotional acceptance, bodily intimacy, and love in a world that excludes them.

Conclusion

Through a concentration on audiences, form, and space, I show how narrative productions of gender, essentialism, and cis- and heteronormativity challenge and impact everyday feminist stories about coming out and being out. This research adds to the discussion about how narratives are collectively- and contextually-produced social performances for audiences. In particular, I also show how discursive forms of text are important as storytellers differently take up these narratives using emotions, poetry and/or logic for either separatist or large, diverse and unknown audiences as members attempt to convince, defend, or make claims in attempts to codify their experiences. The importance of poetry in the overall lesbian movement cannot be denied (see the works of Judy Grahn, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, among others). As Garber (2000) noted, poetry invokes the cultural meanings lesbians have produced through lineage, history, and identity. In this way, poetry is a social constructionist project. This discursive form of text also reflects the activist practice of seizing the language and using it as a way to affect narrative productions about gender and sexuality. This study reflects three important findings.

Just as these narratives are not uniform across LGB and T, they remain at the center of feminist work as particular kinds of activism persist online. And, while Salon feminists and Tumblr bloggers are writing in different times and spaces, their stories suggest that it is (trans

and cis) women's lived experiences that coordinates their narratives and centers them within their own communities. And, just as self-described radical and trans feminists often find themselves at odds, this finding suggests that perhaps their consciousness-raising practices are more similar than we thought. In the feminist tradition, poetry is how they connect the personal with the political. Indeed, radical feminism grew largely out of the 1960s civil rights movement and women's dissatisfaction with the "so-called male dominated liberation struggles" (Linden-Ward and Green 1993). Over the years and stemming from their work in other movements, radical-identified feminists others developed a distinctive vocabulary to demand social change and to make sense of the way the world is organized that continues online. And, in many ways, self-described trans feminists are growing the work other feminists have done to codify sexism to theorize about trans women's experiences. In this way, the feminist lineage of narrative productions positions these two kinds of feminisms not as ideological distinct, but as stemming from practices both aimed at opposing and challenging patriarchy.

But, *which* aspects of feminisms have persisted as mobilization moves online? *Womyn's Words* is, in part, defined by its attention to the personal, lived experiences of its members. Woven together with poetry, short stories, and other creative ways of constructing narrative heroines, plots, morals, and spaces, the newsletter reflects how feminists can connect logic and emotions using the everyday. The newsletter took on distinctive characters of Salon feminists' lived work in the context of the social relations of patriarchy. Online, what seems to have survived in #radicalfeminism is the attention to theory. Users take up past narratives, including the heroines and morals of the past to reflect on the political abstractions that seem relevant in logic-centered claims. What seems to be missing is the sense of community. However, these methods of producing narratives by way of political abstractions make sense given that the

audiences online are large, diverse, and also very abstract. Bloggers on #transfeminism do take up emotion codes to address the essential body and to write for audiences with complicated gender histories of their own. What is also missing is an experiential discussion of race and class. While there is talk of a need to center trans women of color within the hashtag, bloggers do not readily write from these experiences.

Original theories of radical feminism were also marked by a focus on sexuality, specifically in the pursuit of a distinctive practice as produced by and for women. That is perhaps one of the reasons that radical-identified lesbian feminists evoked emotion through poetry in the coming-out and being-out process. Poetry expands what we know about producing effective communication and toward whom those emotions can be expressed. In print, Salon feminists also initiated a “Sexuality Web” (WEB November 1983) as a way to discuss lesbian sex and to share their experiences in the form of poetry, song, and more. However, this endeavor was short-lived as members concentrated more so on the production of a sexual identity and community rather than on also incorporating ideas and practices about sexual pleasure. As Frye (1983) makes clear, lesbians of the time did not always articulate their desires because patriarchal language cannot account for lesbian love. However, just as Black radical-feminist poets like Audre Lorde wrote about her “flesh that hungers” and the “curve of your waiting body” (Lorde 1970), it is perhaps white-cis-lesbian feminist communities like that of Salon in which women find it difficult to write about sexual acts. So, while early radical-identified feminists achieved a unique sexual identity and community, these narratives did not translate online where “out” lesbians do not often identify themselves. What did persist, however, was a unique radical-feminist identity that depends on how bloggers distinguish themselves from other kinds of feminists using symbolic codes.

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**CHAPTER THREE: FRAMING LIBERATION: HOW STRATEGIES OF DISSENT
AND THE FOCUS ON OPPRESSION DIFFERENTLY DEFINE
RADICAL-FEMINIST (CYBER)SPACES**

Abstract

I analyze the radical-feminist liberation frame produced in lived communities organized by text compared with interactions online using data from a historical newsletter and current micro-blogs. I ask two primary research questions: how do cohorts of activists differently frame the same issue over time to meet their everyday needs? And, do frame disputes and different feminisms persist as organizing moves from textual publications to online spaces? Using a textual analysis, I show how liberation is framed, extended, and disputed; how frame extensions are more likely to benefit those whose lives resonant with these changes; how framing work influences how members negotiate identities, boundaries, and meaning; and how frame disputes happen as members see the movement's evolution as incompatible with effective change. Using the theory of narrative productions of meaning, I connect public narratives of gender and essentialism with members' stories to explore how frames that emphasize political dissent challenge public meanings about gender and sexuality to focus on women. On the other hand, when framing strategies highlight women's relationships with men, the narratives produced are more about oppression.

Introduction

[Lesbians'] lives are spent in Society's realm...Do we dare to change? To be a different entity in amongst our own. I dare to live! To be me! To change, metamorphosis is occurring! My form is changing. My mind is opening. Who am I now? I'm me – T. [Womyn's Words] (WEB October 1983).

“The personal is political,” “Eve was framed,” or “smash patriarchy” are common, everyday phrases or frames used by feminists to characterize what they understand as the problem of women's oppression, the strategies used to dissent, and the realization of the political self. In particular, frames organize how groups perceive and communicate their everyday experiences. Borrowed from Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974), this is framing and social movement actors use it to figure out what's wrong, who's to blame, and what is to be done in a meaningful way. For instance, radical-identified feminists often use messages of “liberation” to signify the work women do with like-minded members in designing, funding, and implementing successful challenges to patriarchy or the domination of women by men, especially in areas of sexuality (Whittier 1995). While the radical-feminist “liberation frame” can certainly mean different things to different people in different times and spaces, the liberation of women generally means to free women of those patriarchal institutions that divide rights, privileges, and power by gender. Those discourses and institutions could mean everything from the government to heterosexual marriage; however, self-proclaimed radical feminists often see men as the problem.

Grounded in the master frames developed by activists in the 1960s and 70s, how to “smash patriarchy” is also an area of contention within the movement as members pursue liberation. Some took this message to mean that who a person sleeps with, how they dress, and who they interact with are all important political statements that underline “the personal is political” – that a “metamorphosis” is essential to dissention. For those practicing radical

feminism in the past, the centrality of lesbians and their connection to women's political resistance to patriarchy is implicit in liberation (Taylor and Rupp 1993). And, in a political system that distributes rights and resources differently amongst groups, activists often respond by producing spatial and identity boundaries of their own (Gamson 1997). Regardless, ideas about liberation connects the work women have done throughout the history of the movement from its manifestation in public street protests to the work of local organizations focused on issues of health, rape, abortion, abuse, etc. (Whittier 1995). And, while the liberation frame has been extended and disputed over time through lived communities as coordinated by text, bloggers in radical-feminist spaces online have also taken up the liberation frame and theorize from the work of early activists. This connection is particularly important when we describe space as the social interactions and ways of communicating or organizing that happen between people, bodies, communities, and ideas.

I analyze the radical-feminist liberation frame produced by lived communities as organized by text compared with interactions in online spaces. The data come from a 1980s-to-2000s printed newsletter and current micro-blogs. I ask two primary research questions about social movements, framing, feminism, and space. In order to suit their everyday needs, how do cohorts of activists differently frame the same issue over time? And, do frame disputes and different feminisms persist as organizing moves from textual publications to online spaces? I provide a textual analysis to show how liberation is framed, extended, and disputed over time to construct boundaries in both on- and offline spaces. I show how liberation is framed, extended, and disputed; how frame extensions are more likely to benefit those whose lives resonant with these changes; how framing work influences how members negotiate identities, boundaries, and

meaning; and how frame disputes happen as members see the movement's evolution as incompatible with effective change.

Using the theory of narrative productions of meaning, I connect public narratives of gender and essentialism with members' stories and spaces to explore how frames that emphasize political dissent challenge public meanings about gender and sexuality to focus on women. These counterthemes challenge embedded cultural themes to position women's communities as collective, independent, and important for liberation. Here, liberation is based on and attends to women's everyday lived experiences. On the other hand, activists are moving online during a time when audiences are large, diverse, and mostly unknown. In this space, public narratives about gender and essentialism continue to influence how liberation is framed as stories do not necessarily challenge dominant themes or develop distinctive emotional cultures that reflect the everyday needs of lesbians. As a result, when framing strategies highlight women's relationships with men, the narratives produced are more about oppression so that women seem vulnerable and socially subservient. Here, the liberation frame is relegated to the abstract. And, instead of "smashing patriarchy," bloggers point to other feminists, namely those they describe as equality feminists, as culpable in their own subjugation.

Whereas radical feminism is based on the collective destruction of institutional and discursive sexism, equality feminism is more centered on the individual, choice, and equality. Members believe that "female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world" (Tong 1989, 2). And, whereas self-proclaimed radical feminists protest by raising public awareness through direct actions like a sit-in at *Ladies' Home Journal*, the 1968 protests against the Miss America pageant, and speakouts, those identified as equality feminists advocate equality through legal and

political reform. While equality is a highly contested notion, “equality” often appears as a harmonious and a-conflictual concept in which women and men can achieve the same political and professional success through law (Lorber 2010). This is how I situate the “equality frame.” But, just as the equality frame has been used successfully in many movements, the liberation frame is perhaps more difficult around which to mobilize. As a result, #radicalfeminism bloggers often take up the work of theorizing liberation and of drawing clearer boundaries between “us” and “them.”

The first part of my analysis is based on the printed newsletters collectively written by self-identified radical lesbian feminists in Western Florida who practiced their own brand of separatism. In 1982, they began meeting monthly in what they called Salons, named after the cultural and intellectual collectives of Revolutionary France. Within the first year, Salon feminists formed the collective, Women’s Energy Bank (WEB), and began publishing their newsletter, *Womyn’s Words*. At its height, the mailing list was over 250 subscribers, which symbolized feminists’ interest in connecting their doings locally and through text. And, by framing liberation in terms of culture or separatism, Salon feminists were advocating for a frame extension of the movement’s central liberation frame to promote lesbianism as “feminist theory in action” (Abbott and Love 1972, 136).

Over the years, the women grew together to incorporate consensus decision-making, nonviolent conflict resolution, and feminist practices and activism. They held Salon programs about coming and being out, body image, fat oppression, ageism, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, journal writing and even financial planning, technical skills, substance, addiction, relationship challenges, health, art, history, and BDSM (bondage, dominance/submission, sadomasochism). Together, they traveled to the Michigan Women’s Music Festival, the Southern

Women's Music Festival, Take Back the Night, Pride festivals, and other feminist and lesbian gatherings. It was in Michigan where they learned many of the ideologies they put into practice locally. They endeavored to create a special place just for lesbians. And, every year, they collectively celebrated Salon's anniversary with a birthday party to honor women.

Salon feminists focused on the everyday – where lesbians ate, drank, socialized, and spent money – to take a definitive and militant stance against patriarchal gender. As a result, lesbians developed strategies of separatism and ownership to create new possibilities in feminist spaces that were open to them and to hold open the potential to reach across spaces and make new affiliations, identifications, and alliances. The challenge facing lesbian communities was not just the acquisition of new spaces, but the logic of patriarchal space which promoted surveillance, exploitation, and marginalization. Through political dissent, Salon feminists laid claim to their own space that, while still informed by some aspects of essentialism, was by and for lesbians. And, even as WEB disbanded in the early 2000s as trans women attempted to join the community and as the broader feminist movement migrated online, movements never really begin anew. Online, activists continue to take up the liberation frame in between mass uprisings to show what's wrong, who's to blame, and what is to be done.

Movement Frames, Frame Extension, and Frame Disputes

Activists disseminate ideologies, shape collective identities, motivate membership, and develop solidarity through offline networks (Crossley 2015; Diani and McAdam 2003; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Taylor 1989). These organizational ties are critical to the persistence of the feminist movement and the women's liberation movement of the 1970s was, in part, a result of a pre-existing network of friendships (Crossley 2015). And, because feminist newsletters stemmed

from the 1970s women's movement, these printed lineages created a space for activists to write about potentially sensitive issues in safety for an audience of fellow activists. While mainstream media outlets were not always sympathetic to feminist pursuits, the newsletter allowed communities to organize under consensus-based processes in which all members could participate. Newsletters became beloved members of the community. And, much like the exchange of feminist newsletters and zines, online textual networks like blogs also contribute to feminist organizing and the dissemination of feminist ideologies, goals, and strategies (Crossley 2015). Bloggers write for large, diverse, and mostly unknown audiences through back-and-forth conversations that are situated amid a virtual sphere that can be hostile to feminist ideas. Online storytellers are also attuned to concepts and theories like intersectionality and white privilege that were still being developed in the 1980s. They respond to backlash, expand recruitment bases for mobilization, and stay active during abeyance by writing feminist perspectives into dominant discourse and spaces in a way that stems from the theories of previous cohorts. Both newsletters and blogs, however, provide members with a kind of instruction manual for how to practice and talk about feminism locally and online.

Movement participants also take an active part in framing. Focusing on what is “in-frame” and what is “out-of-frame,” frames bracket the sensual world to tell us what is relevant and how events are tied together (Snow et al. 2007). Beginning with micro-level activism, framing problematizes those meanings that are largely taken for granted to suggest that discourse is contestable, negotiable, and subject to change (Benford 1993; Hedley and Clark 2007; Snow 2013). In the context of social movements, framing helps actors redefine everyday problems into social injustices, describe the origins of the movement, point to heroic icons, and describe the movement's goals and future agenda (Benford 2002). These narratives also help define a group's

identity and guide collective actions (Hunt et al. 1994), identify perceived opponents, (Benford and Hunt 2003), and develop and redefine boundaries (Benford 2005; Benford and Valadez 1998).

Local groups that appear early on in a movement will often create a master frame that can guide the work of future generations and potentially limit their framing efforts (Snow and Benford 1992). Often employed by more than one movement, master frames are metanarratives that draw on prevalent themes like equality, rights, or injustice (Trumpy 2014). Master frames provide local groups with a shared focus, a common language, and a collective starting point (Carrol and Ratner 1996). As the movement continues, people draw on master frames to talk about perceived injustices or encounters in a way that fits “the tenor of the times” (Oliver and Johnston 2005, 189). Subsequently, frame transformation involves changing up old meanings or understandings to generate new ones (Noakes and Johnston 2005). Snow et al. (1986) argue that transformation depends on the development and adoption of new injustice frames and a change in how members think about who or what is to blame. For instance, the liberation frame identifies institutionalized and discursive sexism as the culprit for women’s subordination. Likewise, frame extension happens “when a group extends its primary framing to include interests or points of view that are incidental to its primary objectives but of considerable salience to potential adherents” (Snow et al. 1986, 472). Frame extension is a strategic move taken up by participants as a way to attract target audiences or potential allies and members (Trumpy 2014).

Frame disputes happen when members’ experiences differences of opinions or preferences regarding claims associated with social movement framing activities. As activists negotiate the everyday through particular versions of reality, frame disputes affect various

audiences' understandings of the movement and manage people's impressions about their cause (Al-Rawi 2014; Benford 1993; Benford and Snow 2000; Croteau and Hicks 2003). Most fundamental are those disputes that relate to diagnostic framing or what's wrong and who or what is to blame for the problem (Benford 2013). Another type of dispute involves disagreements over prognostic disputes or what is to be done to repair the current injustice (Buechler 2011). Finally, movement participants often disagree about which strategies are most likely to resonate among specific audiences for mobilization. These are known as motivational disputes (Benford 2013).

Much research has been done in terms of comparative framing (see Benford and Snow 2000); however, little is known about how the same event, object, or issue is framed over time (Brulle and Benford 2012; Ferree et al. 2002) or across different actors (Benford 1997; Cress and Snow 2000; Dimitrova and Stomback 2005; Ferree et al. 2002; Snow et al. 2007). I take up this work here to expand our understanding of social movement narratives, growth, and change. By empirically tracing the trajectory of frames and stories, I also focus on issues like conflict, mobilization, and meaning as frames disperse (Snow and Benford 1999) and are disputed (Benford 1993). And, while studies show how U.S. feminist movements are shifting forms, tactics, and targets offline (Whittier 1995), there is little empirical research about feminist work online (Ayers 2003; Crossley 2015; Ferree 2007; Martin and Valenti 2013).

In one such study, Crossley (2015) finds that Facebook enlarges and nourishes feminist networks, creates online feminist communities, expands recruitment bases for both online and offline mobilization, and increases opportunities for online interaction with adversaries. That maybe because Facebook users use their real name on their profile and often post identifying biography information like where they live and work on the "About" page. Facebook users also

can set up local “Events” to coordinate connections offline. However, Hart (2015) notes that Tumblr users adopt pseudonyms to hide their offline identities behind unique usernames. In other words, if bloggers want to meet offline, they must post their identifying information directly into the hashtag. He also shows that there no social norm on Tumblr dictating that users must reciprocate “follows.” This makes it difficult to ascertain at what scale users actually network with one another and with whom. Thus far there are few studies exclusively about Tumblr (Hart 2015); this research also aims to explore whether or not Tumblr blogs are capable of fostering the same kinds of interpersonal networks that are critical to the persistence of the feminist movement.

Method

This study depends on the phenomenological, constructionist, symbolic interactionist theory of narrative productions of meaning in the public realm (Loseke 2016). This theory centers not solely on those narratives used in sensemaking (Maines 2001) or those stories people write and tell about themselves (Baker 1996; Godwin 2004), but even more so on how public narratives circulate within and are challenged by these stories. Indeed, stories that disseminate in the public realm resemble small stories in that they are composed of scenes, plots, and characters, and contain moral lessons. Unlike small stories, however, socially-circulating stories typically have multiple authors and are constantly challenged and modified in response to other narratives, current events, and cultural change (Loseke 2016). But, by connecting the stories that flow through the social world via text, blogs, and so forth with broader meanings, researchers can better understand how communication is widely understood by diverse audiences and how it reflects, perpetuates, and/or challenges shared ways of thinking. After all, it is through this

connection that we can see how ideas surrounding gender, essentialism, and cis- and hetero-normativity, for example, are used to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and moralities over time in order to tell different stories. It is through this method that we can also see how other aspects of narrative productions surrounding these concepts circulate unchallenged to perpetuate ideas about bodies, boundaries, and exclusion. Here, texts arise as activist objects in relationship to their work and in their distinctive relations with the surrounding social world (Smith 1990b). As analysts, we must locate the controlling frameworks and interpretive schemata provided by those social relations to understand the intention of the texts and how distinctive methods of telling are grounded in lived actuality (Smith 1990b).

Previously taken-for-granted meanings are challenged within the context of a more globalized and socially-fragmented world, where what we know is increasingly mediated (Loseke 2016). Swidler (1986) calls these “unsettled times” or those historical moments when something happens in the world that compels people to either re-orient themselves or to push for change or order. Yet, given this fragmentation, communication remains more or less understandable to audiences and communities with diverse world views, practical experiences, and moral values. This requires a rethinking of culture as the “historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols” (Geertz 1973, 89). This definition allows us to better describe the connections between cultural meanings and action. This formulation also offers an image of culture as a “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views that people can use in varying configurations to solve problems, strategize, and to construct identities, movements, and communities (Swidler 1986, 273). It also allows for an analysis of how ways of ordering and action are persistent through time and space.

The more-or-less shared systems of meaning incorporate cultural codes in order to make sense to large, diverse audiences. As a way to integrate the narratives and social movements literature, I use Gamson's (1988) concept of "cultural themes" to talk about those meaning systems that are established on the base of some larger world views. These systems could refer to anything from technological progress to ideas about essential gender and are also known as systems of *thinking*. They tell us what is believable and what is important. Gamson suggests that cultural themes integrate both *themes* or ideas about how society ought to be and *counterthemes* or those problems that some believe need changing. In the study of social movements, scholars can show how themes and counterthemes or counterframes compete to organize how different groups can make sense of the world. Indeed, challengers of deeply-held public narratives depict a situation, condition, or way of interacting as urgently in need of change. Likewise, defenders of the status quo describe the proposed change as the problem.

But, because effective persuasion speaks to both minds and hearts, appeals to thinking or logic alone are not sufficient (Loseke 2016). Emotion is also a necessary component in producing effective communication (Altheide 2002; Richards 2004; Waddell 1990). And, for every emotion, people learn associated vocabularies, norms, and beliefs about them. For this, I rely on Gordon's (1990) notion of "emotional cultures" to describe those expectations, standards, and ideas that allow members of a society to talk about emotions and to evaluate them as desirable or undesirable. Emotional cultural refer to ways of *feeling*. And, as members seek out stories to make sense of their troubles and community change (Frank 1995; Plummer 1995), emotional cultures can eventually become the yardsticks by which members morally evaluate themselves and others (Baker 1996; Wood and Rennie 1994). In other words, these ways of expressing and assessing emotions can become "tied down" (Schudson 1989) and embedded

within spaces (Fischer 2003; Stone 1997) so that communities may not survive ruptures between narratives and local actions.

Textual or document analysis is a suitable technique for this analysis as it requires that data be examined and interpreted so as to draw out meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge about the broader world (Atkinson and Coffey 1997; Bowen 2009; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Diamond 2006; Rapley 2007; Smith 1990a, b, 2001; Ng 1995). And, in a comparative analysis of historical and contemporary texts, a textual analysis helps to describe the trajectory of narratives and frames so as to show how they are produced over time. Analysis specifically focuses on how ideas, practices, and identities, emerge, transform, mutate, and become the relatively durable things we take for granted (Rapley 2007). Textual analysis also encourages us to think about how the data is organized, what is in the data and what is not, and how some ideas and practices fail while others survive (Rapley 2007).

Data

My analysis focuses on the radical-feminist liberation frame and how cohorts of activists differently frame the same issue over time so that certain disputes and particular aspects of feminisms persist as organizing moves online. I use data I collected in a university's Special Collections – *Womyn's Words* (dates 05/1983 to 04/2013: 3,554 pages) and one Tumblr micro-blogs #radicalfeminism (472 pages) gathered in 2015. Tumblr fulfills several criteria outlined by Boellstorff et al. (2012) for a virtual ethnography in that it is multi-user, shared, persistent, and constantly evolving. Tumblr is also where radical-identified feminists are mobilizing online (Goldberg 2014). For each data set, I relied on my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB)'s decision that this data is considered public and does not need IRB approval. However, I

because *Womyn's Words* represents a small, local community, I chose to use given aliases or initials to distinguish between authors. If no author name was given, I leave that information out. And, while Tumblr bloggers are required to create a username and password to post comments, they do not need one to observe. Here, I use usernames – if provided – to distinguish between authors. During the analysis, I used QSR International's NVivo 10 software to develop narrative codes about characters, plots, settings, themes, conflict, audience, and so forth. In this sense, the data become a story that describes the human experience by ways of those cultural themes and emotional cultures used to achieve change or protect the status quo (Polkinghorne 1995).

Culture and Care as Political Dissent: Frame Extension in Radical-Feminist Spaces

Some radical-identified lesbian feminists extended the liberation frame to include an interrogation of heteronormative culture which often leaves questions of sexuality unexamined. And, in lesbian communities, the culture frame includes the “variety of beliefs and practices based on the core assumption that a connection exists between an erotic and/or emotional commitment to women and political resistance to patriarchal domination” (Taylor and Rupp 1993, 33). Through separatism, Salon feminists resisted the notion of compulsory heterosexuality which Rich (1980) defines as the naturalization of heterosexuality through the enforcement of patriarchy. Indeed, Jackson (2006) saw compulsory heterosexuality as attentive to the lives of those living outside its boundaries, as well as those living *within* heterosexual relations – a realm not always attended to by the concept of heteronormativity. For instance, under compulsory heterosexuality, lesbians must “come out” and are presumed to be less-than as compared to straight women, while straight women might be expected to give up their careers to care for the

home. And, for Salon feminists, it was their professed experiences living in patriarchy that prompted them to think about the culture in liberation.

As one self-described radical feminist wrote, “Why can’t I speak? Where is my voice? I will find it, I will learn to speak out. I will learn to tell the anger of my oppression.” (E. WEB November 1983). Salon feminists certainly took up the feminist project of collectively describing and confronting aspects of their oppression which were previously hidden. As a result, Salon feminists not only engaged in consciousness-raising efforts in-person, but also recorded the production of local narratives in text to connect with these stories with the broader movement. Over time, members produced counterthemes that challenged the dominant ways of thinking about women as vulnerable and in need of men’s protection and care. Because the group was predominantly made up of self-identified lesbians, members also took up Rich’s (1980) idea of the lesbian continuum to emphasize the need for women to focus on the needs and emotions of other women, rather than their connection to men. Instead, women cared for one another based on the knowledge produced through consciousness-raising, which was “facilitated in nonhierarchical, loosely structured, face-to-face settings that [were] isolated from persons in power... [in these spaces,] people [could] easily express concerns, become aware of common problems, and begin to question the legitimacy of institutions” (Hirsch 1990, 245). This tactic helped members legitimize their experiences, grow their community of activists, and produce an emotional culture in which women’s care for one another was not only deemed desirable, but also expected.

To be sure, this act of political dissent or non-conformity is only possible in post-industrial, capitalist societies where radical-identified lesbian feminists can establish women’s businesses, participate in consciousness-raising, invite women into homes they own, create

lesbian families, and support women's political organizations. These conditions are not present in all societies. However, when we consider the trajectory of radical feminism in the U.S., Frye (1983) notes that separatism differs from segregation depending upon whose interests these actions serve and who initiates them. In other words, segregation is instigated by dominant groups and serves their interests – in the case of patriarchy, men introduce and are expected to benefit from these institutions. As Frye (1983) theorized, however, feminist separatism is based on political resistance and serves those who are dominated, namely lesbians. And, for self-identified radical feminists, the basis is a feminist understanding of the “herstories” of sexual politics and the resulting communities.

One Salon feminist wrote:

After almost 30 years of physical work doing plumbing, roof repair and related tradeswoman jobs, the unimaginable happened – I fell off a toppling ladder and shattered my shoulder... As the only woman working construction job sites for many years, safety was cemented into the subconscious lest I had an accident and it would have been another reason for the prevailing misogynistic attitude to determine “women can't do construction work – they fall off ladders...” I acknowledge and appreciate the compassionate, dedicated [women who cared for me]. – P. (WEB August 2002).

In the U.S., feminist separatism marks an important departure from how activists focus on the positivity of dissent, rather than exclusively on the unequal relationship between women and men. Salon feminists certainly experienced problems as public narratives of essentialism circulated within in this space to inform how they determined gender based on notions of essential bodies (see chapter four). However, their frame extension of liberation into culture allowed the work of original theorists to persist through the negotiation, development, and sustainment of a distinctive sexual and feminist identity. Over time, this extension in terms of women's emotional, physical, and financial support of one another also signifies how liberation was differently framed over time based on the local stories and needs of this community's

members. Once again, this frame ran counter to narrative productions that situate women's social productivity and emotional happiness as dependent on men.

P. explores her understanding of her own dissent in taking up the physical labor of tradeswork. However, she also recognizes how she might be held accountable for and representative of all women in how others perceive of women's bodies and their connection to physical vulnerability. As P. works through what she describes of as her own oppression in the broader culture, however, she also recognizes the importance of her ties to other women. While complete separation from men is rarely possible, P. explores the ways in which Salon women are not only connected through consciousness-raising and activism, but also through community and care. These connections support Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum just as the textual recording of P.'s local, face-to-face connections position them on a timeline of political feminist "herstory." In this sense, members produce effective communication that speaks to both the minds and hearts of feminist activists who are thought to understand how patriarchy works in both the personal and political sense.

Building Cultural Bridges: How Text Connects Local Communities

During the 1980s, Salon feminists experienced the Reagan administration and the backlash against feminism that came with it. While some saw the culture frame as a falling away from the radical-feminist ideals of 1970s revolution, others saw the rise of lesbian bookstores, presses, music companies, festivals, and separatist communities as a means by which women could liberate themselves by producing real change beyond the protest line (Adams 1998). And, at the level of policy, many feminists agreed about how to collectively mobilize to ensure (some) women received fair wages, legal protection, representation, etc. Through their attention to legal

and political reform like the Equal Rights Amendment, Salon feminists did not draw hard and fast lines around liberation and equality. Indeed, framing and narrative overlap in movement communities contributes to the survival of feminism and many saw separatist culture as a way to influence greater change.

In line with the radical-feminist adage, personal is political, members developed programs like their Womyn-to-Womyn Fund to financially assist community members in need.

One Salon feminist wrote:

...in the middle of typing this article, an old friend called and told me the story of how her mother was slowly dying, and how much time she was spending caring for her. And I thought, that is one reason lesbians have less energy for activism – we are mothers, daughters, caregivers, caring for the sick and dying, raising children, holding down more than one job because we still don't earn as much as men yet we have at least as many financial pressures and obligations as men, if not more – K.W. (WEB November 1984).

Community programs developed through a members' own expectations as women, lesbians, and feminists. Through *Womyn's Words*, Salon feminists enacted a kind of textual consciousness-raising in which contributors continued the work of separatism beyond their in-person meetings to not only challenge dominant themes about women, but to develop their own cultural systems and ways of thinking and feeling about their work and one another. This helped to further destabilize notions of compulsory heterosexuality and to create a space by and for lesbians where members developed a political self. On the way to liberation, the destruction of patriarchy, and the end of sexism, they noted, women were stuck in a world of responsibilities, whether it was caring for family members or financial obligations. As a result, Salon feminists extended the liberation frame into culture as a way to address the needs salient to lesbians and potential members. However, in the spirit of radical-feminist ideas about liberation and change, Salon

feminists wrote about how they did not see liberation or equality as an individual achievement. The focus was on community, culture, and care.

Through frame extension from liberation into culture, Salon feminists addressed needs differently than those made meaningful by the equality frame. Rather than focus on individual success within the public sphere, members drew from their own in-person experiences as “mothers, daughters, caregivers, caring for the sick and dying, raising children, [and] holding down more than one job” (K.W. WEB November 1984) to extend a call to action through text to care for others. A Salon editor wrote:

Building bridges is an important task in any movement... It is a special challenge for women whose strong energy is taxed daily with demands of basic survival. In our own community poverty and homelessness oppress hundreds of women and children. Women whose first concern is where to lay their head will seldom be found at our full-moon celebrations, workshops or rentals. They don't have the same choices as their well-housed sisters, nor the same opportunity to pursue visions and become empowered. Women who are in circumstances of comfort and privilege must reach out to their sisters in economic distress. Go to emergency shelters, waiting rooms of social service agencies, labor pools, soup lines, and even blood plasma centers. These are the places where women go to eke out sustenance in times of crisis. Their courage and stamina is a challenge to well-housed women and a call to action (WEB May 1987).

Even as the collective identity “radical feminist” did not survive in the broader sense of the feminist movement throughout the 1980s, the liberation and culture frames bound women together to set them apart during this conservative era. So, while they didn't draw seemingly impenetrable boundaries around narratives of liberation and equality, Salon feminists helped sustained the movement to question the progression of American society and to assure radical-feminist ideas stayed alive during a time when many activists pursued the individual material success made so popular during this time. Members also actualized frames not only in text, but where women actually lived and needed the support of women. And, through sliding-scale admissions to Salon and other events, as well as calls to “Celebrate Your Labor! Come dress in

your work clothes or your dream work clothes” (WEB September 2005), Salon feminists once again recognized the importance of everyday life along the way to liberation.

Paying for the Revolution: The Part Business Plays in Liberation and Culture

Salon feminists understood work and money as crucial to supporting women-only spaces. Early on, in an article entitled, “101 Ways to Help Women be Themselves,” members were advised to “[s]upport women-owned businesses” and to “[s]tart a woman-owned business” (WEB October 1988). Even those who held down “true establishment, patriarchal jobs” understood their money as going a “long way towards supporting women’s bookstores, [the] Michigan [Womyn’s Music Festival], and many of our important causes” (WEB September 1989). One member wrote:

WOMYN – Our Last Chance...

We’ve received word from the [local bar] (the last and only all-womyn’s bar in the... area) that unless we, as a group, stand together and support our bar – we will lose it!

On the average, there are only 6-8 womyn attending each night, and a few more men taking liberties of attending. We’re letting the men chase us out. Now, we can’t have that, can we? By standing together this month and going to the bar we can secure our bar...

Come on out, show your support, win a few prizes or just cheer the womyn on! Again, it’s our last shot at keeping a place of our own to relax and have fun with all our womyn friends. How many are going to stand by and let men take that away from us?! Thank you! – a concerned patron (WEB February 1994)

When faced with dispersion, members saw the maintenance of meaningful spaces as a radical affirmation of the right to exist, to take up space, and to sustain the work of early movement participants. Promoting women’s businesses in print also became a way to support (and to elicit support from) other lived communities. This went a long way toward creating a (semi) community-sustained space. Indeed, along with auctions to fund WEB and business

partnership opportunities, *Womyn's Words* editors printed advertisements for financial planning, loan services, and women-owned businesses like bookstores, massage, printing, travel, and pet grooming. Amid calls for *Womyn's Words* investors and financial reports, editors advertised Salon as a "Womyn's Marketplace" to help support "our sisters in business." This connected people's local narratives through text to construct a space with distinctive feminist political and cultural characteristics. As one contributor wrote:

Who Cares What Lesbians Think Anyway?

...We should learn to use [our] power wisely to make the changes we need to make. Give your money and your loyalty to those who deserve it. Those who are going to give you something in return. Those who are doing the most for the Lesbian community. Think about it – D.N. (WEB January 2001).

Once again, these narratives focused on the taking of space as dissent rather than on building a space that focused predominantly on oppression. The above passage also highlights the dominant sexual identity made meaningful by the liberation frame and the emotional cultural in which members developed shared ways of interacting, communicating, and organizing. Salon feminists took the idea of money and loyalty seriously as women engaged in the production of *Womyn's Words* to learn new skills and to ensure their everyday work benefited a local, feminist organization aimed at improving the lives of lesbians. All members wore different hats to fulfill the many tasks required to run a successful feminist organization. In addition, records of sales were printed in the newsletter as representative of communal success. And, *Womyn's Words* itself became a valuable member of the community as women wrote, edited, printed, folded, stuffed, and distributed the newsletter.

As Salon feminists maneuvered the pre-constructed liberation frames developed in the 1960s and 70s, however, they found little written about how to navigate business in the

everyday. While members acknowledge their own privilege as “well-housed women” (WEB May 1987), money became an unproblematic part of Salon feminism. As a result, advertisements for capitalist enterprises that were incompatible with radical feminism found their way into the pages of *Womyn’s Words* because they were women-owned (e.g., corporate banks and diet clinics). Eventually, regular reports began appearing in *Womyn’s Words* about how WEB was steadily losing money. And, in the last print-only edition, editors concluded with a “Thank you to our Advertisers” (WEB September 2011). This farewell signaled how commerce became so intertwined with the community that some womyn-only endeavors could not survive without it.

Radical Feminism in Online Spaces: Social Media as Text

By the time Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton were facing off in the 2008 Democratic primaries, tech-savvy feminists were expressing themselves online. But, even though women are holding more and more governmental positions, joining military units that were once men-only, and graduating from college and graduate school in unparalleled rates, the attack on reproductive rights and other radical-feminist initiatives means that the backlash against feminism is holding strong. Online, feminists are responding with blogs, social media campaigns, and online media to mobilize against this backlash and to stay active during abeyance. And, Tumblr is a popular microblogging social networking site for bloggers to take up radical-feminist ideas in online spaces (see Goldberg 2014).

Microblogging is a type of blogging in which users write about themselves and send updates to friends and followers. At the time of this project, there were roughly 163.9 million blogs and 72 billion posts on Tumblr. 1) 31% of all visitors are in the U.S; 2) the average user visits about 67 pages every month; 3) Tumblr is most popular with 18-to-29 year olds; 4) 16% of

Tumblr visitors are Latino, 13% are Black, and 14% are white – data about other racial groups was unavailable; 5) 51% of U.S. users identify as male, while most of the other 49% does not identify in terms of sex or gender (Costill 2014). Compared to printed newsletters, anyone can contribute in an unedited format, which makes Tumblr a particularly attractive space for collective theories of feminism to flourish. Observers read Tumblr in reverse order and, unless removed by Tumblr, users see all posts, which appear as a communal stream of consciousness organized by self-identifying hashtags. While Twitter has a short length limitation for posts, Tumblr does not. Tumblr also supports multimedia posts like images, audios, and videos. Bloggers can post from anywhere at any time and “follow” one another, reblog one another’s post, click on a link to that user’s larger blog housed on another site, and make notes about others posts.

Tumblr also allows bloggers to share radical-feminist theories, establish boundaries, and activist strategies. Unlike feminist newsletters, however, online spaces like Tumblr are shared with many types of feminists, including those who post about liberation and equality. As a result, #radicalfeminism bloggers may need to establish clearer boundaries around their theories in order to maintain their distinctive feminist identities and to communicate definitive goals and strategies around which to mobilize and recruit. While Salon feminists occasionally delved into the equality frame with a push for legal reform and other public issues, those posting on #radicalfeminism rely almost exclusively on the original theories of their radical-feminist foremothers to push for liberation. These framing tactics lead to the construction of diagnostic frames or those that point to what’s wrong and who’s to blame and prognostic frames or those related to what is to be done to repair the perceived injustices that are aimed at legitimizing radical feminism as an alternative to equality feminism.

What's Wrong? and Who's to Blame?: Diagnostic Framing Disputes on Tumblr

In identifying the public narratives a dominant social space like social media, we can certainly say that this space privileges market relays in an attempt to place the user in a lived space of total control (Nunes 2006). While the separatist tactics employed by Salon feminists were an attempt to escape patriarchy, Tumblr is already a space of conflict or a battleground in which discursive battles take place and in which feminists attempt to claim and redefine dominant narratives and spaces. To paraphrase Lefebvre (1991), “a [cyber]space that is other,” such that spaces exist not ‘beyond’ this system but as articulated events, enacted within the very same nexus of material, conceptual, and experiential processes that give rise to a dominant social space of control, efficiency, and network capitalism (391). And, in general, marginalized groups find it difficult to legitimize their experiences. But, in dominant spaces, the task of legitimization may be even more difficult. In other words, relying on the radical-feminist tactic of “telling it like it is” may not be considered legitimate enough to mobilize through the liberation frame.

Early on, bloggers posting in #radicalfeminism responded to the stories of personal violence and abuse told in consciousness-raising sessions in order to point to patriarchy as the problem. However, rather than speaking about the everyday (micro) subordination often shared by women in the early days of radical feminism, activist practices on social media necessitate a broader more macro-view of what is going on. And, in these data, the 2014 massacre perpetrated by Elliot Rodger near the University of California, Santa Barbara campus sparked a discussion about who's to blame for this backlash. One #radicalfeminism blogger, smashesthep quoted Gail Dines, a *Huffington Post UK* writer:

I have been a radical feminist for as long as I can remember. As I witness the marginalisation of radical feminism in the cultural discourse, in publishing, and in

women's studies programs, I see the feminist movement I once loved become powerless to explain what is happening to women – especially the horrific levels of violence against women. This failure has reached a new level following the massacre by Elliot Rodger of students at UC Santa Barbara. The media is on fire with women, and some men, writing about misogyny as the cause, as if that explains why Rodger targeted young women and rambled on about “sluts” refusing to date him. Misogyny is not something created out of thin air, to be caught much like a cold that drives those infected to commit horrendous acts of violence. It is an ideology... that... glorifies violence against women.

Online, bloggers also point to the cultural and social culmination of misogyny as the problem in how violence against women is normalized and legitimized. Oppression is the focus. And, Tumblr posts like the above not only framed patriarchy for what is wrong, but also the marginalization of radical-identified feminists in the movement and the broader acceptance of the equality frame. This prompted users to defend their space by also pointing to men and equality feminism as culpable in the escalation of violence against women. While those identified as equality feminists might push for men's participation in the movement to stop violence that that of Rodger, #radicalfeminism bloggers write that his actions as are the reason to rethink how the movement frames who's to blame. Tumblr blogger, endless-knotx, wrote, “...Men cannot be feminists because they have exactly what we are fighting against- male privilege. Feminism isn't for men.” This sets up the liberation frame in opposition and exclusive of the popular equality frame in a way that does not counter public narratives of essentialism, but instead uses the notion of gendered bodies to make claims about the idea of women's perpetual subordination.

Frame disputes affect how audiences understand the movement and the cause. If the equality frame is about securing women's equality in the form of law reform, the freedom of choice, and partnership with men, then the radical-feminist liberation frame in this hashtag is

more about defending space against perceived opponents. The following posts reflect this boundary-work:

ashypinky

..the more I read about [equality] feminism the clearer it gets: You're in a prison cell. [Equality] feminism decorates its cell and moves whatever bit of furniture there is around. Radical feminism tries to blow up the cell and break free. (..then blow up the whole prison.) my definition.

tenaflyviper

[Equality feminism] is nothing but gender worshipping servants of the patriarchy, that's why they can run free uncriticized and do whatever they want. They're not even feminists. They ARE the patriarchy.

vulvanity

...Do equality feminists know that the only reason men have no problem with their pathetic excuse for feminism is because they are literally making no difference to better the lives of women? They are actually making it worse. You're not a feminist. You're a handmaiden of the patriarchy...

In defining what is “in-frame” and what is “out-of-frame” (Snow et al. 2007), bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism take care to not only define who they are, but also who they are not. And, if they are to identify those culpable, storytellers are also careful to situate themselves outside that category. While this may be necessary to claim legitimacy, it makes finding a common ground between groups difficult in terms of ideology, constituency, tactics, and, as a result, the framing process. Ideally, in any movement, individual frames would be consistent with organizational frames. However, #radicalfeminism bloggers find themselves defending their territory through a negotiation of us and them in this space of conflict or discursive battleground.

These battles also make an intersectional analysis of race, class, and women's differential locations within that matrix difficult as sexism remains the focus. Tumblr blogger, genderheretic writes:

I am not an 'equality feminist' ... the standard against which women's progress towards 'equality' is measured is based on a male norm. Instead I believe in women's liberation

— in a complete reconceptualization of womanhood as worthy and valuable... I feel so discouraged when examples of women assimilating into a patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist culture are celebrated as a win for feminism: Women on the military front line, women on boards of exploitative companies, women directing pornography. This isn't women's liberation, it merely validates hegemonic masculinity.

genderheretic highlights some of the past work radical-identified feminist did in “the reconceptualiz[ing] of womanhood as worthy and valuable” through the liberation frame and how these stories motivate her toward radical-feminist mobilization online. As smashesthep, also writes, “I do not buy the argument that radical feminism is outdated... Plenty of young women take radical stances... without ever being exposed to radical feminist literature.” However, genderheretic's focus on “equality” and patriarchy continue to emphasize women's oppression under the dominant mode of narrative production. And, because #radicalfeminism bloggers rely on the work of heroines of the past, namely, Sheila Jeffreys, Julie Bindel, and Janice Raymond, to sustain their radical identities, they continue to prioritize gender over other categories.

Bloggers like genderheretic speak to the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality theoretically; however, there is little connection between the problem and what to do in lived actuality on #radicalfeminism. Members also do not appear to situate liberation within their everyday lives so as to connect text, experience, and discourse or to extend or transform the frame into emotional care and community. Indeed, texts like *Womyn's Words* reflected the lived work of past activists in the context of the social relations of patriarchy. Online, however, what seems to have survived in #radicalfeminism is the attention to theory. Users take up past narratives, including the heroines and morals of the past to reflect on the political abstractions that seem relevant in logic-centered claims. What seems to be missing is the sense of community. However, these methods of producing narratives by way of political abstractions make sense given that the audiences online are large, diverse, and also very abstract. In the

context of these types of audiences, however, this could also explain why users like Girlisariot, who appear to be oppositional to radical feminism, write, “Nothing like a bunch of white people to make an entire movement about them.”

What is to be Done about Oppression?: Advocating for Women-Only Spaces Online

Thus far, prognostic frames include excavations of early works by self-described radical feminists to maintain a distinctive activist identity online. Taken together with an opposition to the equality frame, members’ use of pre-constructed frames helps them identify allies and opponents and to shore up the symbolic and ideological boundaries no matter how problematic. And, in addition to “pissing men off” and “establishing some clear boundaries” (liketheghost), bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism also advocate for changing how they live. This evokes the culture frame established by earlier groups like Salon who believed that “women only spaces” and exclusivity would accomplish liberation. However, while this asserts the everyday as theoretically important, once again, it does not connect the diagnostic and prognostic frames through lived actuality. In other words, members do not show what is wrong in their individual lives offline (e.g., wife abuse, lack of healthcare or child care, homelessness, etc.) before showing how to effectively make change online.

Another way to create interactive conversations on Tumblr is the “Ask Box” function. Each blog has an ask box where users can ask the blogger questions and, if they so choose, remain anonymous. Here, one user answers an anonymous question:

anonymous said:

Are there things that you participate in that you know contradict your radical feminist beliefs? If so what are they and how do you hope to overcome them if at all?

Radical feminist, snowflakeespecial answered:

Absolutely. Radical feminism is one of the hardest things for a woman to reflect in her behaviour, if that makes any sense...

I'm bisexual and lean strongly towards women, but I am het-partnered, by the way, and try not to let it get in the way of my feminism... I fuck up a lot, probably, but no longer do I protest that lesbian feminists "hate" bi[sexual] [and] het[erosexual] feminists and are irrational about our partners. I prioritise women in my feminism at all costs. I listen to lesbians and bisexual women in samesex relationships... I follow all the lesbian feminists I can on Tumblr. From them I am learning about other women's sexuality... and about the female experience when sexual desire for men is irrelevant and unneeded. From them I am learning how to be a better woman who can support her sisters more, whichever way I am sexually inclined.

Like early groups who practiced separatism, "follow[ing] all the lesbian feminists... on Tumblr" and "learning about other women's sexuality" becomes a way for bloggers to carry on the culture frame. This creates new possibilities in online spaces for members to reach across boundaries to make new affiliations, identifications, and alliances and to assert a feminist perspective into dominant discourse and spaces. However, while the feminism of the past began with micro-organizing in lived communities, Tumblr feminism begins in macro-spaces where text becomes not reflective of interaction, but the interaction itself. Bloggers do not know each other's offline identities and may find it difficult to connect beyond this virtual space (Hart 2015). While bloggers might "follow" lesbians in the radicalfeminism hashtag, it does not seem to be reflective blogs written self-identified lesbians and lesbian issues are rarely discussed on #radicalfeminism. Blogger, andromedamedrexia, who appears oppositional to radical feminism, wrote, "Radfems believe in political lesbianism, then wonder why lesbians hate them." So, while past framing efforts signified an ownership of culture by and for lesbians, its transference online could mean that #radicalfeminism is merely about lesbians rather than lesbian-centered. Here,

while the radical aspect of some bloggers' identities remains intact, the distinctive sexual identities of a local community seemed to have disappeared in this space.

What is to be Done?: Framing Disputes on Tumblr

Diagnostic disputes are based on ambiguous interpretations of reality. On the other hand, prognostic disputes center on conflicts over what is to be done in order to make change (Buechler 2011). Once again, these data are situated around the climactic moment when 14 people were killed at UC Santa Barbara. Before the massacre, Rodger wrote in his manifesto outlining his plan to invade a sorority house. He wrote, "I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up blond slut I see inside there. All those girls I've desired so much. They have all rejected me and looked down on me as an inferior man" (Garvey 2014). And, three years before, feminists implemented a demonstration called SlutWalk in response to Toronto police officer's statement that "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order to not be victimized" (Valenti 2011). This street protest was an aim to combat slut-shaming and reflected the metaphors of choice, reclamation, and integration behind the equality frame. Conversely, those posting on #radicalfeminism looked to the past heroines of the movement for answers about how to achieve liberation that counter public narratives produced about women's vulnerable sexuality and those feminist narratives that position this same sexuality as powerful. misandryisland, quotes Valerie Solanas' (1967) *SCUM Manifesto*:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.

Short for the Society for Cutting up Men, Solanas' manifesto is a declaration of war against patriarchy and capitalism. While the equality frame focuses on women achieving success, independence, and fair treatment within the current system of gender and material enterprise, bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism position liberation as the work women do to dismantle these systems. This framing tactic certainly competes with dominant cultural themes that defend the status quo to describe feminism itself as the problem at hand rather than gender and capitalism. However, the focus on logic and boundary work not only perpetuates embittered frame disputes within the broader movement, but also dismisses the everyday work of lesbians who developed a distinctive sexual identity and culture based on care and community.

Stories told in this hashtag are produced in interaction with oppositional frames, which can produce framing disputes in spaces of conflict. In the context of boundary-work, it can also be a way for members to call each other out when they do not agree with how the narrative is progressing. One self-identified trans woman in particular appeared over a dozen times in the #radicalfeminism thread. Here, tonidorsay writes:

Gender Abolition... is a fundamentally homophobic, transphobic, lesbophobic, bi[sexual]phobic, misogynist concept derived from extremism and a utopian idealism that ignores the lived experiences of other women, and the decades of work of women in non-western societies.

Counterframing can undermine or neutralize a group's version of reality or interpretive frame (Benford 1987). In response, members can shift their framing in more moderate or more radical directions. Indeed, each time tonidorsay appears on the thread, bloggers firm up their conviction that liberation is the answer to the problem of patriarchy. Tumblr blogger, endless-knotx writes, "[Equality] 'feminism' just tells us to enjoy the things that oppress us. *Real* feminism tells us to smash the system that's keeping us down" (my emphasis). However, when radical-feminist

foremothers like Solanas sold the mimeographed document in the streets of Greenwich Village in 1967, the price tag of \$2 for men and only \$1 for women played into the capitalist market that Solanas despised (P. Smith 2013). And, when bloggers write that equality feminism “completely ignores the struggles and fight these historical women dealt with” (transcultist), #radicalfeminism unproblematically reflects Solanas’ argument. Once again, pre-constructed frames of the past do not provide the starting point for bloggers to talk about issues like money. So, while these narratives point to ideas about “smashing patriarchy,” the radical-feminist pursuit of getting to the root of the problem does not seem to be supported by practical solutions. Instead, public narratives of essentialism circulate as certain bodies are excluded and as ideas about equality are lumped together with patriarchy.

Conclusion

This article explores how liberation is framed over time by different cohorts of self-described radical feminists and how certain aspects of feminism persist across spaces. Indeed, social movement actors who carefully tailor their tactics and strategies to the situation are most successful (Amenta 2006; McCammon et al. 2008). Through a coordination of texts, Salon feminists used words in interaction to create lived women-only spaces that prioritized the everyday needs of lesbians and extended the liberation frame into culture and care. As a result, they used consciousness-raising to approach liberation communally, develop a distinctive emotional culture, and focus on the logic of everyday political dissent. And, rather than drawing boundaries around liberation and equality, Salon feminist assured that radical feminism persisted through times of abeyance by constructing narratives with local heroines, plots, and morals. At the time of their mobilization and situated on the heels of original radical-feminist theories,

Salon feminists certainly did not have the language to talk about the patriarchal roots of money. And, public narratives of essentialism certainly influenced their decision to exclude trans women and, subsequently, their cultural rules about how to think about and care for certain bodies. However, through the centering of (some) women within a lived community, members put theory into action to develop counterthemes that challenged compulsory heterosexuality to develop a unique sexual identity.

Online, bloggers assert feminist discourse into commercial spaces and spaces of conflict as a way to push for the liberation of women. However, #radicalfeminism bloggers on Tumblr focus almost exclusively on theory. Indeed, contemporary activists have access to a much larger body of literature than did feminists of the past. However, rather than situating theory within the lived actuality of the everyday, users tend to use past narratives and morals to reflect on the political abstractions of logic-centered claims. This could relate to the large, diverse, and abstract space of this virtual world and the need to legitimize radical feminism for such an audience. And, because Tumblr bloggers obscure their offline identities with anonymous user names, storytellers may not have the support of lived communities from which to theorize. Even so, in the wake of instruction manuals like Sanberg's (2013) *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* which encourage women to achieve equality, young women continue to turn to radical feminism as a way to reject the mainstream. Perhaps some women do not want to fit into the corporate, gendered, and sexual practices to fit into the heteronormative culture. As a result, members take up the negotiation of meaning through boundary work and the dissemination of the pre-constructed frames of the past as an alternative to notions of equality.

Textual analysis also pushes researchers to locate what is missing in the data. So, while particular framing strategies and identity practices persisted across time and space, the original

pursuit of a distinctive sexuality by and for women did not. While Salon feminists developed a lesbian identity based on the needs of members, radical-feminist theories pushed for discussions and practices surrounding desire and pleasure. In print, Salon feminists initiated a “Sexuality Web” (WEB November 1983) as a way to discuss lesbian sex and to share their experiences in the form of poetry, song, and more. However, this endeavor was short-lived as members concentrated more so on the production of a sexual identity and community rather than on also incorporating practice. As Frye (1983) makes clear, lesbians of the time did not always articulate their desires because patriarchal language cannot account for lesbian love. However, just as Black radical-feminist poets like Audre Lorde wrote about her “flesh that hungers” and the “curve of your waiting body” (Lorde 1970), it is perhaps white lesbian-feminist communities like that of Salon in which women find it difficult to write about sexual acts. So, while early radical-identified feminists achieved a unique sexual identity and community, these narratives did not translate online where “out” lesbians do not often identify themselves. What did persist, however, was a radical-feminist identity that depends on boundary work and how bloggers distinguish themselves from other kinds of feminists using logic, public narratives about essentialism, and feminist narratives about oppression.

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CHAPTER FOUR: THE “PENIS POLICE”: FEMINIST SPACES, TRANS WOMEN, AND THE MAINTENANCE OF THE SEX/GENDER/SEXUALITY SYSTEM

Abstract

Using data from a historical newsletter and current micro-blogs, I provide a textual analysis to show how feminists determine gender in everyday sexualized spaces. I ask two research questions: As self-proclaimed radical feminists work toward recognition, agentic embodiment, and the safeguarding of lesbian spaces, how do members differently determine gender for insiders and outsiders in order to preserve a particular kind of radical feminism? And, as we compare textual accounts from lived communities to talk in online spaces, how does the introduction of trans women into radical-feminist spaces influence how radical-identified feminists determine gender? I show how public narratives of gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality circulate in lesbian spaces as members use the “penis police” to produce identity and community and to maintain exclusionary feminism at the expense of trans women. Using the theory of narrative productions of meaning, I expand upon the concept of determining gender to move beyond questions about how gender is socially recognized to an analysis of how gender attribution challenges or maintains the sex/gender/sexuality system.

Introduction

[Radical lesbian feminists] left there feeling again the impact of being “invisible” women, but all the more determined to direct our energies towards the success of the [community] and the goals it envisions (Women’s Energy Bank April 1985).

Grounded in the 1960s and 70s, radical feminism emphasizes the social dominance of women by men and the sexual politics of the so-called private sphere—sexuality, relationships, and heterosexuality in particular. As a way to become aware of collective problems, self-proclaimed radical feminists also practice consciousness-raising away from people in power to question the legitimacy of patriarchy or the social and sexual domination of women by men (Whittier 1995) and to participate in the local production of discourse aimed at challenging these institutions. Their theories allowed them to question the essentialism of bodies, but also provided a way to critique how people assigned male at birth learn masculinity as a way to oppress women. As a result, some radical-identified feminists began identifying trans women as a part of that power structure based on their belief in a necessary connection between biology and accountability to gender.

Transgender includes not only the small number of people who undergo genital surgery, but also those who take hormones, identify as a gender they were not assigned at birth, or publicly perform a gender that does not conform to the Western binary (Crawley et al. 2008). And, while some members have always practiced trans inclusivity (Williams 2016), some radical-identified feminists feared that women who “have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, 461; this is now known as cisgender) would become invisible within their communities as trans women sought recognition, solidarity, and social justice. And, as feminists move from textual to online spaces, some self-identified radical feminists have chosen to solidify the boundaries between cis

and trans even more. But, it is along these divisions – those between radical feminism and trans women – that we can ask questions about how feminists authenticate community members, determine gender, and perpetuate gender segregation and exclusion in relationship to the sex/gender/sexuality system.

Both lesbians and trans women can experience contradictory embodiment by attempting to live as either straight or as a man – to remain invisible under heteronormativity. However, by seeking memberships in communities, cis lesbians and trans women are trying to gain recognition of their identities and bodies in whatever terms are possible for that particular time and space (Connell 2009). In particular, this recognition is sociological salient when space is defined as the social interactions and ways of communicating or mobilizing that happen between people, bodies, communities, and ideas. In this sense, doing gender or finding other lesbians or trans women becomes more about historical and social solidarity and organizing than individual identity. However, while the public narratives of a time provide the criteria for determining gender (Westbrook and Schilt 2014), feminist communities also do the work of figuring out how to authenticate insiders and outsiders' genders. While both cis lesbians and trans women struggle against invisibility and contradictory embodiment, feminist literature reveals the troubled relationship between radical feminism and trans women (Connell 2012).

Westbrook and Schilt (2014) develop their theory of “determining gender” to show how people place others in gender categories and determine their gender based on the presented information. This theory situates the body in sociological analyses of interactional gender in certain spaces to interrogate the sex/gender/sexuality system. Determining gender is enacted as a part of what West and Zimmerman (1987) refer to as accountability to beliefs in sex category in face-to-face interactions. In text, determining gender arises from the written encounters of

members who document biographical and bodily knowledge about themselves and others. At times, this means gender is determined in imagined interactions, primarily in cis people's imagined interactions with trans people in which bodies are hypothetical.

This leads to my primary research questions about gender, feminism, and space more generally. As radical-identified feminists work toward recognition, agentic embodiment, and the preservation of lesbian spaces, how do members differently determine gender for insiders and outsiders in order to preserve a particular kind of feminism? And, as we compare textual accounts from lived communities to talk in online spaces, how does the introduction of trans women into radical-feminist spaces influence how radical-identified feminists determine gender? Using data from a printed newsletter published from the 1980s to 2000s in comparison with current micro-blogs, I provide a textual analysis to show how feminists determine gender in everyday sexualized spaces. Paradoxically, while feminism is intended to oppose hierarchies, I show how public narratives of gender, essentialism, heterosexuality circulate in lesbian spaces as members use the "penis police" to produce identity and community and to maintain exclusionary feminism at the expense of trans women. Using the theory of narrative productions of meaning, I expand upon the concept of determining gender to move beyond questions about how gender is socially recognized to an analysis of how gender attribution challenges or maintains the sex/gender/sexuality system by attending to the binary, boundary-work, and sexual spaces.

The first part of my analysis is based on the printed newsletters collectively written by self-identified radical feminists in Western Florida. In 1982, they began meeting monthly in what they called Salons, named after the cultural and intellectual collectives of Revolutionary France. Within the first year, Salon feminists formed the collective, Women's Energy Bank (WEB), and began publishing their newsletter, *Womyn's Words*. Over the years, the women grew together to

incorporate consensus decision-making, nonviolent conflict resolution, and feminist practices and activism. They held Salon programs about coming and being out, body image, fat oppression, ageism, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, journal writing and even financial planning, technical skills, substance, addiction, relationship challenges, health, art, history, and BDSM (bondage, dominance/submission, sadomasochism). Together, they endeavored to create a special place just for lesbians. And, every year, they collectively celebrated Salon's anniversary with a birthday party to honor women.

At its height, the mailing list was over 250 subscribers, designed specifically for "womyn-born women." Some self-described radical and lesbian feminists use the term "womyn-born women" to mean "women who were born as women, who have lived their entire experience as women, and who identify as women" (Vogel 2014). And, if patriarchy was the problem, then separatism was the answer as lesbians laid claim to physical and textual spaces in forging networks of political and cultural resistance. However, as the community grew to over 65 members, members took up the burgeoning radical-feminist literature in order to produce a livable and workable community for its members. Ultimately, as trans women attempted to join the community and as the broader feminist movement migrated online, WEB disbanded.

Doing Gender, Determining Gender

Situating "passing" as the problem within the existing social order, Garfinkel (1967) and the other researchers who focused on the study of transsexuality read Agnes, the trans woman who was at the focus of the study, as fundamentally passive in how she was destined to suffer the judgement of others. Later on, West and Zimmerman (1987) offered another reading consistent with contemporary feminism and the theme of social justice where doing gender is an active

invitation to recognition and agentic embodiment in everyday spaces. The theory goes that people take interactional cues from one another to sort each other into categories of “male” and “female” and to develop implicit rules about the characteristics assigned to particular genders. Termed “gender attribution” (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 2) or “sex categorization” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 127), this categorization process is theorized as an unavoidable yet typically mundane in everyday interactions. Exceptions to these unremarkable interactions happen in cases of ambiguity, which can breakdown expected interaction to produce anxiety and even anger in some instances (West and Zimmerman 1987; Schilt 2010).

Many people use accountability to bodies or what West and Zimmerman called sex category (i.e., assumed biological-based determinations) to figure out another person’s gender in sexualized interactions and spaces, as it is often the fear of unwanted heterosexual encounters that motivate gender policing. As a result, people can reassert the presumed naturalness of a male-female binary even in lesbian spaces where members take on the work of recognition and agentic embodiment. However, identity-based determinations do not imply that members see gender as fluid. Instead, people determine whether or not a person’s claim to a particular gender is legitimate. Here, it is important to note that Westbrook and Schilt distinguish between sexual and “nonsexual” spaces to show how people employ “identity-based determination[s] of gender” or a combination of identity and biology. Instead, I turn to those scholars who see gender as organized, locally present, and “ever-present, never background” (Crawley 2011, 109). In other words, gender does not take a backseat to institutions like family or work. Instead, all spaces are sexualized in that gender is “written on the visible body” and “always available for accountability” (Crawley 2011, 109). This centers the body even more and underlines the impact of the sex/gender/sexuality system in all spaces.

Determining gender can also show how the invisibility of the body has led some academics and activists to paint trans women as feminine parodies and invaders of women-only spaces (Jeffreys 2005; Morgan 1977; Raymond 1979). Even West and Zimmerman (1987) unproblematically cite the most widely-read American text about transsexuality at the time which treats trans women as agents of patriarchy (see Raymond 1979). After all, ideas about identity and biology can play the loudest within some radical feminist communities, texts, and (sexual) spaces. It is often trans women's bodies that become the focus of blame for the dissolution of radical feminist communities and cis women's invisibility.

Gender determinations can also illustrate how public narratives of gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality inform everyday interactions over time. In text, members can use imagined interactions to determine gender and proponents of exclusion may also rely on the work of historical groups and scholars to make their case. For some radical-identified feminists, the practice of lesbian separatism was certainly done so under the premise of empowerment and historical knowledge (Frye 1983). However, the affirmation of a binary and the focus on bodies (namely the presence or absence of a penis) affirmed these public narratives that posit women as inherently vulnerable and desperate for protection (Hollander 2001). The guise of protecting women maintains the sex/gender/sexuality system as the system banishes those who potentially call the presumed naturalness of biology into question (Seidman 1995). Even identity-based determinations rely on notions of femininity as oppressive for the basis of membership. As I show, the focus on genitals and the presumption of male socialization naturalizes gender difference and gender inequality to exclude trans women from feminist spaces.

By focusing on gender as produced in imagined scenarios and in online spaces, scholars can see how the everyday work of constructing and maintaining particular feminisms are tied to

the institutional workings of gender and cis/heteronormativity. This requires that we look not only at the current divisions between radical feminism and trans women as they happen online, but also at the historical narratives produced in text. Subsequently, I develop the research about imagined interactions to show how “physical characteristics... that are visible” (Kessler and McKenna 1978, 76) and the “possession of a clitoris and vagina or penis and testicles” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 132) are important in how members determine gender in segregated spaces (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). In developing specific criteria for membership, however, explicit rules are not the only texts that influence interaction. Policy is also informed by the historical work of members and imaginary encounters between cis and trans women. And, while Westbrook and Schilt (2014) concentrate on different cases across social contexts, I consider how actors do the work of determining gender in similar contexts across different spaces.

In addition, while studies show how U.S. feminist movements are shifting forms, tactics, and targets offline (Whittier 1995) and that cyber-activism is crucial to trans education (Hill 2000), there is little empirical research about feminist work in online spaces (Ayers 2003; Crossley 2015; Ferree 2007; Martin and Valenti 2013). Crossley (2015) finds that Facebook enlarges and nourishes feminist networks, creates online feminist communities, expands recruitment bases for both online and offline mobilization, and increases opportunities for online interaction with adversaries. That may be because Facebook users use their real name on their profile and often post identifying biography information like where they live and work on the “About” page. Facebook users also can set up local “Events” to coordinate connections offline. However, there are few studies about Tumblr (Hart 2015) and journalists identify this microblogging site as the space where embittered boundary ward between radical and trans-identified feminists are happening online (Goldberg 2014; Loza 2014). And, unlike Facebook,

Hart (2015) notes how Tumblr users adopt pseudonyms to hide their offline identities behind unique usernames in a way that often prevents in-person interactions. Following these studies, this study aims to expand the research about feminism online and to explore whether or not Tumblr blogs are capable of fostering the kinds of interpersonal networks that are critical to the persistence of the feminist movement.

Method

This study depends on the phenomenological, constructionist, symbolic interactionist theory of narrative productions of meaning in the public realm (Loseke 2016). This theory centers not solely on those narratives used in sensemaking (Maines 2001) or those stories people write and tell about themselves (Baker 1996; Godwin 2004), but even more so on how public narratives circulate within and are challenged by these stories. Indeed, stories that disseminate in the public realm resemble small stories in that they are composed of scenes, plots, and characters, and contain moral lessons. Unlike small stories, however, socially-circulating stories typically have multiple authors and are constantly challenged and modified in response to other narratives, current events, and cultural change (Loseke 2016). But, by connecting the stories that flow through the social world via text, blogs, and so forth with broader meanings, researchers can better understand how communication is widely understood by diverse audiences and how it reflects, perpetuates, and/or challenges shared ways of thinking. After all, it is through this connection that we can see how ideas surrounding gender, essentialism, and cis- and heteronormativity, for example, are used to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and moralities over time in order to tell different stories. It is through this method that we can also see how other aspects of narrative productions surrounding these concepts circulate unchallenged to perpetuate

ideas about bodies, boundaries, and exclusion. Here, texts arise as activist objects in relationship to their work and in their distinctive relations with the surrounding social world (Smith 1990b). As analysts, we must locate the controlling frameworks and interpretive schemata provided by those social relations to understand the intention of the texts and how distinctive methods of telling are grounded in lived actuality (Smith 1990b).

Previously taken-for-granted meanings are challenged within the context of a more globalized and socially-fragmented world, where what we know is increasingly mediated (Loseke 2016). Swidler (1986) calls these “unsettled times” or those historical moments when something happens in the world that compels people to either re-orient themselves or to push for change or order. Yet, given this fragmentation, communication remains more or less understandable to audiences and communities with diverse world views, practical experiences, and moral values. This requires a rethinking of culture as the “historically transmitted patterns of meaning embodied in symbols” (Geertz 1973, 89). This definition allows us to better describe the connections between cultural meanings and action. This formulation also offers an image of culture as a “tool kit” of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views that people can use in varying configurations to solve problems, strategize, and to construct identities, movements, and communities (Swidler 1986, 273). It also allows for an analysis of how ways of ordering and action are persistent through time and space.

The more-or-less shared systems of meaning incorporate cultural codes in order to make sense to large, diverse audiences. As a way to write about those codes that reproduce over time, I use Smith’s (1999) concept of “ideological codes” to talk about those meaning systems that people “pick up” from reading out them, hearing them, and using them to pass on to others. These systems are also known as systems of *thinking* and tell us what is believable and what is

important. Ideological codes do not appear directly; in other words, no one seems to be imposing anything on anybody else. Instead, these codes become so embedded within our culture that they operate as free-floating forms of control in relationship to public ways of communicating. They are not institutions or social organizations like the state, but are locally adopted and reproduced. They are the social organizers that generate the narrative vocabularies available for people to make claims about their experiences and to make sense of the world.

But, because effective persuasion speaks to both minds and hearts, appeals to thinking or logic alone are not sufficient (Loseke 2016). Emotion is also a necessary component in producing effective communication (Altheide 2002; Richards 2004; Waddell 1990). For this, I turn to the concept of “emotional discourse” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Loseke 2009). Emotional discourse refers to ways of *feeling*. It is critical for persuasive communication in the public realm and describes which emotions are appropriate to feel when, where, and toward whom or what, as well as how emotions should be expressed (Loseke 2009). It also shows how emotion operates within public communication and perpetuates social conflict. And, as members seek out stories to make sense of their troubles and community change (Frank 1995; Plummer 1995), emotional discourse can eventually become the yardsticks by which members morally evaluate themselves and others (Baker 1996; Wood and Rennie 1994). In other words, these ways of expressing and assessing emotions can become “tied down” (Schudson 1989) and embedded within spaces (Fischer 2003; Stone 1997) so that communities may not survive ruptures between narratives or discourse and local actions.

Textual or document analysis is a suitable technique for this analysis as it requires that data be examined and interpreted so as to draw out meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge about the broader world (Atkinson and Coffey 1997; Bowen 2009; Corbin

and Strauss 2008; Diamond 2006; Rapley 2007; Smith 1990a, b, 2001; Ng 1995). And, in a comparative analysis of historical and contemporary texts, a textual analysis helps to describe the trajectory of narratives and frames so as to show how they are produced over time. Analysis specifically focuses on how ideas, practices, and identities, emerge, transform, mutate, and become the relatively durable things we take for granted (Rapley 2007). Textual analysis also encourages us to think about how the data is organized, what is in the data and what is not, and how some ideas and practices fail while others survive (Rapley 2007).

Data

Before I describe the data sets used in this study, it is important to note how a comparative textual analysis of feminist newsletters and interactive blogs is important in understanding the context in which narratives are produced. Feminist newsletters stemmed from the 1970s women's movement and created a space for activists to write about potentially sensitive issues in safety for an audience of fellow activists. While mainstream media outlets were not always sympathetic to feminist pursuits, the newsletter allowed communities to organize under consensus-based processes in which all members could participate. Newsletters became beloved members of the community. And, much like the exchange of feminist newsletters and zines, online textual networks like blogs also contribute to feminist organizing and the dissemination of feminist ideologies, goals, and strategies (Crossley 2015). Bloggers write for large, diverse, and mostly unknown audiences through back-and-forth conversations that are situated amid a virtual sphere that can be hostile to feminist ideas. Online storytellers are also attuned to concepts and theories like intersectionality and white privilege that were still

being developed in the 1980s. Both, however, provide members with a kind of instruction manual for how to practice and talk about feminism locally and online.

My analysis focuses on the radical-feminist liberation frame and how cohorts of activists differently frame the same issue over time so that certain disputes and particular aspects of feminisms persist as organizing moves online. I use data I collected in a university's Special Collections – *Womyn's Words* (dates 05/1983 to 04/2013: 3,554 pages) and one Tumblr micro-blogs #radicalfeminism (472 pages) gathered in 2015. Tumblr fulfills several criteria outlined by Boellstorff et al. (2012) for a virtual ethnography in that it is multi-user, shared, persistent, and constantly evolving. Tumblr is also where radical-identified feminists are mobilizing online (Goldberg 2014). For each data set, I relied on my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB)'s decision that this data is considered public and does not need IRB approval. However, I because *Womyn's Words* represents a small, local community, I chose to use given aliases or initials to distinguish between authors. If no author name was given, I leave that information out. And, while Tumblr bloggers are required to create a username and password to post comments, they do not need one to observe. Here, I use usernames – if provided – to distinguish between authors. During the analysis, I used QSR International's NVivo 10 software to develop narrative codes about characters, plots, settings, themes, conflict, audience, and so forth. In this sense, the data become a story that describes the human experience by ways of those cultural themes and emotional cultures used to achieve change or protect the status quo (Polkinghorne 1995).

“The Penis Police”: Employing Biology-Based Determinations in Lesbian Spaces

Pre-Internet, community newsletters like *Womyn's Words* became a chronicle of lesbian and feminist stories that allowed communities to connect and find each other in real time. Salon

feminists developed a woman-centered space and agentic embodiment by rewriting “herstory” to include figures like Sappho and images of powerful Goddesses. However, like all gender-segregated spaces, women-only spaces rest on and reproduce an idea of a gender binary (Lorber 1993). Through *Womyn’s Words*, Salon feminists organized their local feminist activities by nominating an official “penis police” to ensure no images of men appeared in the newsletter. This is how they coordinated meanings through words and images so that, even before trans women attempted to enter this space, biology-based criteria for membership perpetuated ideas about who was a woman and the kind of feminism that centered on bodies and power. While this helped cis lesbians recognize one another, it also drew seemingly impermeable boundaries around this space and locally reproduced those ideological codes that influenced how members talked about their encounters with perceived outsiders.

To be sure, these membership criteria were based on both actual and imagined scenarios about women’s experiences in public spaces. Women are much more likely to experience sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking, and sexual harassment by men than the other way around (May et al. 2010). Fear in public spaces negatively impacts women’s lives and, even when the danger is low, the manifestation of gender in everyday life puts women on edge (Day 2001). I do not take this lightly. It is, after all, why women are expected to adhere to gendered expectation that restrict their public interactions and why feminist mobilization strategies and spaces are important. However, by connecting feminists’ use of imagined scenarios with how they determine gender, we can see how some members essentially conflate the identities and bodies of cis men and trans women to exclude.

In an article about lesbian personal ads, one member wrote, “I cannot believe men responded to the ad. Did they not read *Gay Female* in bold[?] Perhaps I failed to write the words

seeks same. But men believe they can change a lesbian's sexual orientation by producing the size of their penis" (WEB July 1994). In effect, the penis came to signify a category of people who signified heterosexuality, as well as the vulnerability of women in integrated spaces. Through a coordination of texts and stories, Salon feminists enforced bodily criteria for determining gender in which particular notions of biology were deemed threatening to their personal and collective identity. In another article aimed at making a case for women-only spaces, one member recounted her experiences with an "aggressive" and "violent" man at a women's cultural event. She wrote, "[T]he violence... emanates from his prick... I am using the word 'prick' not as an 'obscenity'... but to emphasize the fact that his violence stems from his maleness, not from anywhere else" – M. (WEB September 1987). Narratives about women's vulnerability as "men rape, attack, kill womyn everyday..." seemed to prompt the need for "womyn [to] stop them" before they "annihilate us all" – M. (WEB September 1987). In this case, penises and, subsequently males assigned at birth in general, were seen as a constant threat to women. This idea also reinforces the construction of heterosexual male desire as uncontrollable and dangerous. However, what people are protecting is not just women, but the public narratives about essentialism and heterosexuality and the logic of binary genders.

Negotiating Feminist Spaces: How and Where Biology and Identity Meet

Salon, members spoke and wrote about their experiences at the annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Michfest) where they learned many of the ideologies they put into practice locally. Beginning in 1976, Michfest was a feminist music festival held every for womyn-born women. And, after continued pressure to change their policies to include trans women, festival organizers instead chose to end the event in August 2015. While Salon feminists

advertised other festivals like the women's art festival, Sisterfire, the Southern Women's Music & Comedy Festival, the Southeastern Lesbian Music Festival, and the Women's Motorcycle Festival, Michfest was written about over 100 times in *Womyn's Words*. In many ways, Michfest became a way to gauge how activism was enacted based on actual and imagined scenarios.

During the early 1990s, Michfest attendees were told that the "no transsexuals allowed" policy "was for the benefit of transsexuals' safety and the safety of women attending the festival" (Burkholder 1993). However, through narratives of safety and fairness, this policy also circulated ideological codes about two opposite genders. And, at Salon, the early 1990s also was a conflictual moment in feminist history when negotiations of identity and community were important for how members responded to change. Ideas about what it meant to be a good feminist were still being reformed and, at times, radical-identified feminists purposefully distanced themselves from other feminists in how they drew boundaries around notions of community, gender, and the body. This is where we can see the divergence between theories that allowed members to question the essentialism of bodies and those interpretations that linked people assigned male at birth with the oppression of women. Certainly, separatist spaces were meant to allow for feminists' agentic embodiment through a communal recognition of members' sexual identities. However, Salon members negotiated gender determinations of biology and identity early on. Identity-based determinations in particular require a person's claim to a particular gender is deemed as legitimate by her audience. And, where these claims are made are also important for how members determine gender.

In the November 1992, alongside the article "Transsexuals at Festivals?," *Womyn's Words* editors approved a picture of three Michfest attendees with their arms around each other. The photo included two Salon members and Nancy Jean Burkholder, the trans woman who was

expelled from the festival, and was accompanied by the text, “[Wo]myn at Michigan? Note from W[omyn’s] W[ords] collective: We believe the photos to be consistent with our [female or non-gender only photo] policy.” The Michfest attendees and the newsletter’s editors both determined Burkholder’s identity was acceptable as a woman. Despite their previous adherence to biology-based determinations, the “penis police” used *Womyn’s Words* as a way to negotiate room for a trans woman to achieve recognition as a woman and feminist within the community. Following this article, the community did not erupt into panic in any attempt to reassert the naturalness of the binary. Indeed, the photo was not mentioned in any of the subsequent newsletters. Despite Michfest organizers’ policy which conflated cis men and trans women, at least some Salon feminists questioned the essentialism of bodies. However, while this instance was based on an actual encounter with a trans women in a safe space, Salon feminists later enacted imagined scenarios with cis men in order to exclude trans women in the local space of Salon.

Ideological Collisions: Developing Gender Policies in Feminist Spaces

During the 1980s, Salon feminists experienced the Reagan administration and the backlash against feminism that came with it. At the level of policy, many feminists agreed about how to collectively mobilize to ensure (cis)women received fair wages, legal protection, representation, etc. However, even as the 1990s heralded in advancements in gender equality, this decade also brought about fierce abortion debates that re-centered the body in the feminist movement. These popular conflicts often reflected many of the issues important to Salon feminists (e.g., rape, domestic violence and abuse, etc.). However, members continued to coordinate community ideas about gender using *Womyn’s Words*. In February 2002, a headline appeared in *Womyn’s Words*: “Everything About Gender You Always Wanted to Know: But

Didn't Even Know How To Ask." What was supposed to be a regular monthly forum *with* trans women signaled the beginning of the end for Salon. One member wrote:

Discouraged

For the past five of six Salons, Salon has not provided a "womyn only space"... Womyn, Lesbians, in particular, are feeling threatened in their own private, sacred space. Why? Because M 2 F Trans are attending Salon. . . . We are womyn. . . Yet we are being forced to capitulate in our own space, to the patriarchy! Trans who were born men are once again asking womyn to accept them . . . to nurture them . . . to take them in . . . to socialize . . . to listen to their problems. . . . Womyn born womyn do not have much in common with M 2 F trans. We cannot possibly share the same herstories. We cannot possibly share the terrors of servitude, ownership, and rape with trans who were born men. We cannot share the pain and joy of childbirth and motherhood. A male birth and upbringing, experiences, thought processes, hair, skin and egos are NOT ours and can never be ours! - C.L. (WEB April 2002).

In the face of change, some members looked to feminist scholars like Mary Daly to figure out how to be a good feminist and to develop the emotional discourse to write about women's historical experience under patriarchy. While some questioned how some determined gender through bodies, other Salon feminists' fear of invisibility in the local space amplified notions of biology and socialization so that all people who were assigned male at birth were suspect. In effect, their overwhelmingly loyalty to a particular kind of radical feminism meant that the majority of members continued to essentialize bodies. As members used text to organize their perspectives, their stories became embedded with meanings about biology and identity to inform feelings of ownership over this space. As a result, some used perceived genitalia and imagined situations to shore up the boundaries of this feminist community. This created a moment of ideological collision.

For self-proclaimed radical feminists, gender was at once a source of oppression and a rallying point for mobilization (Echols 1989). While the lived communities of Salon were about inferring meaning about perceived physical characteristics, the textual space of *Womyn's Words*

not only reflected these interactions, but also became about developing and maintaining a particular kind of feminism. This informed how Salon feminists either accept or reject trans women's identity claims, particularly during times of panic. For C.L. and others, asserting women's weakness in the face of heterosexuality was an attempt to re-establish boundaries. While these imagined scenarios worked to separate insiders from outsiders, it also seemed to unravel members' work in re-writing a herstory of the strong and powerful lesbian. Salon feminists relied on public narratives about how men were helpless in their socialization to commit violence and about how women were also just as helpless to nurture. Likewise, trans women were at the mercy of recognition by cis women.

As these identity-based determinations met with notions of biology, C.L. also asserts the importance of essential bodies. Through text, members determined how those bodies might influence people's interactions, even if imagined. As another member wrote, "Why not limit our membership at all?... We could feature a new group of people every month – recently released male parolees, for instance. They need support... Or, how about drug addicts?" - C.B. (WEB April 2002). If segregation depends on the binary separation of bodies, then women-only spaces also rest on the assumption of difference based on capabilities and interests or the connection between "egos" or personalities and "hair" and "skin" or physicalities. During times of gender panic, men become uniquely terrifying. And by rejecting trans women's gender claims, Salon feminists not only claimed that "Trans are not Lesbians" - H. (WEB May 2002), but as heterosexual cis "men in dresses" (J., WEB May 2002) who are seeking membership for nefarious purposes. Again, this reinforces the binary of male and female and affirms the ruling sex/gender/(hetero)sexuality system in how all bodies are deemed heterosexual until they

achieve recognition. Ultimately, these ideas led to a short-lived policy of Salon as a “womyn born women” only space.

The Un-unravelable Thread: Embedded Spaces and Feminist Negotiations

Even as some feminists wanted an explicit policy about how trans women would or would not fit into this space, others attempted to “open its doors to women, without asking them to verify whether they had, want to have, or have ever employed a penis, real or otherwise” - M.R. (WEB January 2003) by likening the experiences of lesbians to those of trans women. One contributor wrote:

What Makes a Woman?

Imagine you felt [like a woman] deep inside, but on the outside you had a penis. What if everyone told you that you should feel like a woman deep inside because you have a vagina, but you really feel like a man? Or you don't feel like you fit into either category at all?...

When I was born, my mother said to my father “Is it a girl or a boy?” He said, “It's a girl,” and my mother replied, “Are you sure, do you know what to look for?” My mother laughs when she tells that story, and yet he got it wrong.

Imagine this scenario with me: you're a butch dyke, and boy do you look it today. You go to use the women's restroom at work, and some high femme straight woman in stockings and heels just stares at you. “Are you in the right bathroom?” she asks you. I have the feeling that happened to at one of the people reading this. It's certainly happened to me. Are you being oppressed...because of your sexuality? She looked at you and she KNEW you were a dyke. Not because you had your partner in your arms and was wildly kissing her, but because of your gender...

Society uses scare tactics to force women into traditional roles... Even the fact of being a lesbian is a departure from gender roles, which is part of why lesbians get persecuted... because real women want d*ck... This is just one form of the same kind of oppression against transgender people...

Why am I even writing this article for Womyn's Words? How does this relate to a womyn's community?... By virtue of being lesbians, our gender is called into question. I'm also not the only one who plays with gender on a daily basis... This gender thing, it involves ALL of us – E.M. (WEB June 2001).

E.M. attempted to loosen the unspoken policy about biology-based determinations surrounding entry into the space of Salon and to allow for the agentic embodiment of trans women. As a long-time member, E.M. identifies here as butch dyke and, later, as genderqueer (WEB February 2002), E.M. recounts her experience living in a liminal state to show how both lesbians and trans women need community in order to achieve recognition and agentic embodiment. By evoking the imaginary scenario of the “bathroom,” E.M. also rouses the potential dangers of integrated interaction and the need for women’s (cis and trans alike) protection. However, E.M. also brings up narratives of heterosexuality by showing how “d*ck” is always sexual in interaction. If “real women” perpetually want “d*ck,” then its presence signifies a threat to the safety of separatist spaces and a fear of its misuse informs the body policing in gender-segregated spaces. Because male and female genitals are also thought to be oppositional, this makes heteronormativity a ruling force in how gender is determined.

In gender-segregated spaces, trans women and trans men are also policed differently. While cis men are seen as threatening to women-only spaces, trans men are deemed non-threatening because they are not considered a physical challenge. However, they also are not seen as vulnerable and in need of protection from men (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). As a result, trans men and those who identify as genderqueer like E.M. can be seen as pariahs (see Schippers 2007). As opposed to hegemonic femininity, gender pariahs are not necessarily inferior, but may be seen as polluting to the relationship between femininity and masculinity. Those who embody and are defined as “pariah” are simultaneously stigmatized and feminized.

Even after the womyn-born-women only policy was removed from advertisements for Salon, ideas about gender and essentialism continued to permeate the pages of the *Womyn's Words* to coordinate ideas. One member wrote:

Dear Womyn,

I was at a GLBT Talent Show... recently and met a male to female transsexual woman after the show. She had read a courageous poem about her newly constructed vagina... She's now 51 with wild frizzy blonde hair, glasses, natural breasts, a soft plump body - she really looks like a 50-ish woman, not a fake silicone version...

She seemed gentle and fragile to me, in a way. She told me she identifies as a lesbian, but can't find a partner. I liked her and didn't feel threatened by her or her energy... I gave her a ride to find her car because she couldn't remember where she parked it and she looked a little too defenseless to be walking the streets at 11 p.m., barefoot, holding her sandals because her feet were hurting... - A. (WEB August 2002).

By pairing words like “natural,” “gentle,” “fragile,” and “defenseless” with a description of the trans woman’s body, movements, and clothes, A. attempts to quell the ensuing gender panic by desperately asserting the presumed naturalness of a gender binary. Ideas about the defenseless woman were used to signify members. In doing so, A. is sure to describe the trans woman’s body as “natural” rather than the “fake silicone version.” She also points to the trans woman’s vagina to end any fears of the unwanted heterosexuality that can motivate gender identity policing. This was perhaps an attempt to assure other Salon feminists that there is no penis from which to protect other women. It is, after all, the penis rather than the “naturalness” of other body parts that is seen as the primary determiner of gender. It is the framing of male anatomies as sexual treats toward “vulnerable” women in segregated spaces that maintains the binary (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). In doing so, however, this trans woman was stripped of the ability to achieve agentic embodiment and this and other arguments for inclusion were not enough.

Race in Lesbian Spaces: How Imagined Scenarios Position Women of Color

Media often frame women's fear as a "white problem;" however, victimization and fear of public spaces are highest among women of color, especially Black and Latina women (May et al. 2010). Once again, I do not take this lightly. However, women's fear can also stem in part from race privilege (Day 2001). Race, while often invisible from the everyday in the prioritization of gender, becomes evident in how Salon feminists made use of the "penis police." As radical-identified feminists, Salon feminists often emphasized gender as they "reject[ed] patriarchal symbols" to "move out of their reach into our own time and space" (Daly as quoted in WEB December 1983). One contributor wrote, "Even the lowest-caste male in the Third World Society has 'his' wimmin to lord over..." - She-Bear (WEB September 1990). However, biology-based gender determinations preclude in-depth reflections about race and class and, therefore, the experiences of women of color with men. As one member noted "how white the group looks" and how "some newcomers of all ethnicities have never come back..." (WEB January 1998).

In the April 1994 edition of the newsletter, an advertisement appeared for the play, *Tom & Sally* – a "humorous and revealing look at Thomas Jefferson and his mistress/slave Sally Hemings... [the play] expose historical and racial issues with humor and style." The accompanying image featured a Black woman in bed alongside a white man who is attempting to shield his face from the camera – Tom and Sally caught in the act. While the Black woman stares boldly into the camera, *Womyn's Words* editors took the liberty of blacking out the white man's face. In response to the ad, one member wrote:

I was both amazed and amused when I looked at a picture of [the male actor] that suddenly resembled Darth Vader... The piece was designed to reveal and expose the truth of the history of an important and overlooked woman; and to explore and heal

issues of race and diversity. It was censored. Hmmm! On the face value of a picture, a stereotype (a male image)...

I have been the victim of sexism more than once in my life, and am in an incredibly sexist business. I try to overcome the prejudice on an ongoing basis and hoped to have *unconditional* support from members of my own community. – W.L. (WEB May 1994)

In response, the *Womyn's Words*' editors wrote:

One of the things we do that is different is to generally avoid using male images on the pages of *Womyn's Words*... If we were a strictly Hispanic or African American womyn's paper and said we did not accept non-Hispanic or African American womyn's images, there hopefully would be very few, if any complaints... - A.

M. referred to the man's "prick" and the "naturalness" of his "violence" in order to assert the naturalness of the male/female binary and to prioritize gender over race. However, as Koyama (2006) argues, "even the argument that 'the presence of a penis would trigger the woman' is flawed because it neglects the fact that white skin is just as much a reminder of violence as a penis." While Salon feminists printed an image of a Black woman, their strict adherence to policy and the censoring of a "male image" prevented a discussion of Black women's experiences in white male patriarchy. Insiders also made the case for biology-based determination using comparisons to Latina and Black communities without situating their own whiteness. Under patriarchy, the construction of white woman, and white women alone, as "self-confident, independent, assertive, and successful" does not necessarily stem from gender, but those racial/ethnic discourses that uphold the dominance of white men over other races (Schipper 2007, 89).

Given the embeddedness of perceived biology and identity in the newsletter and it is the overarching narrative's dependence on opposition in achieving recognition and embodiment, this community was ultimately unsustainable under the changing ideas about feminism and inclusivity. Members continued to collide in how they determined gender and in how trans women and women of color did or did not fit into the community. In November 2002, a Salon

featuring trans women was cancelled due to divisiveness within WEB. A few months later, one member wrote, "...I cannot, in good conscious, continue to ask [trans women] to make that lonely walk to the womyn-born women only drinking fountain" (WEB January 2003). Articles by women of color also became less and less frequent. After that, Salon meetings became less and less frequent until a few years later, in 2006, feminists stopped meeting all together. After that, *Womyn's Words* became more about the broader LGBT community. The newsletter was published until 2013.

Tumblr as the Entry Point for Understanding Radical Feminism Online

Tumblr is an important microblogging site for self-described radical feminists and trans women (see Goldberg 2014 and Loza 2014 respectively). In particular, microblogging is a type of blogging in which users write about themselves and send updates to friends and followers. And, at the time of this project, there were roughly 163.9 million blogs and 72 billion posts on Tumblr. 1) 31% of all visitors are in the U.S; 2) the average user visits about 67 pages every month; 3) Tumblr is most popular with 18-to-29 year olds; 4) 16% of Tumblr visitors are Latino, 13% are Black, and 14% are white – data about other racial groups was unavailable; 5) 51% of U.S. users identify as male, while most of the other 49% does not identify in terms of sex or gender (Costill 2014). While each micro-blog is not date-stamped, observers read Tumblr in reverse order and, unless removed by Tumblr, users see all posts, which appear as a communal stream organized by self-identifying hashtags. Bloggers can post from anywhere at any time and "follow" one another, reblog one another's post, click on a link to that user's larger blog housed on another site, and make notes about others posts. And, unlike Twitter, Tumblr does not have a word limit for posts and supports multimedia posts like images, audios, and videos.

Tumblr allows bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism to share theories, establish boundaries and activist strategies, and determine gender. Like previous cohorts of radical feminists, sexism remained the central focus of their narratives as members cite theorists like Sheila Jeffreys, Julie Bindel, and Janice Raymond as a way to understand issues like beauty standards and violence against women. For instance, exgynocraticgrrl, recounted a passage she read in her local newspaper in which a young man killed his girlfriend after a relationship characterized by “manipulation, isolation, and psychological destruction.” This shows how, from the perspective of this blogger, the public world remains a dangerous place for women, particularly as these everyday experiences are informed by the broader meanings about gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality. However, while previous cohorts used consciousness-raising to talk about their own experiences, bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism often cited things happening elsewhere as a way to determine gender as situated in bodies. While this violence happened in real life, on Tumblr, they served as basis for imagined scenarios in which people who were assigned male at birth may also become violent.

This particular data set comprises all the micro-blogs organized by the hashtag #radicalfeminism. While most posts center on radical-feminist ideas and theories, other kinds of self-identifying feminists do occasionally add to the conversation to create alternative meanings and I present some of those posts here. While it is impossible to determine whether or not bloggers who post on #radicalfeminism identify as cis women, their overall perspectives about trans women certainly identify this hashtag as primarily “trans exclusionary” where ideological boundary-wars happen between those who identify as different kinds of feminists. And, on Tumblr, biology is no less important, but sits more squarely on the theories of radical-feminist foremothers and ideological codes of logic to make claims about women’s oppression. Given the

massive amount of literature currently available to feminists, it makes sense that bloggers would be savvier about academic theory than previous cohorts. However, their unrelenting reliance on logic at the expense of the everyday is perhaps one of the reasons why these exclusionary practices persist. Indeed, in regards to the transgender movement have been said to produce “...the most bitter battle in the LGBT movement today” (Wente 2014).

“Girls Can’t Have ‘Lady Penises’”: Biology-Based Determinations Online

Online, far-away and local spaces fuse so that members feel a sense of ownership of these virtual worlds. While this is potentially a gender-integrated space without physical boundaries, the radicalfeminist hashtag creates a sexualized space by prompting bloggers to connect the personal and the political and to use biological criteria as a determinate for gender. One #radicalfeminism blogger writes:

Being trans is not a free pass to spread misogyny... There are differences between the female body and the male body. Girls can’t have “lady penises”. If girls having penises is just fine, why would you be transitioning in the first place?... What [trans activists] forget is that female anatomy and female bodies are already silenced in the name of western sexualization... You like dresses and lipstick? Then you must be a girl b[e]c[ause] being a girl is liking dresses and lipstick!... No, we want critical thinking... - 240106

Given that collective identities may strengthen online (Earl and Kimport 2011), biology-based determinations may also strengthen in this space as users strategically take up public narratives about gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality to make claims. And, Kessler and McKenna (1978) note how the “penis equals male but vagina does not equal female” (151) when determining gender. While that may be the case for lived communities and the negotiation of how trans women fit into Salon (see A., WEB August 2002 above), the vagina is very much a prerequisite for determining who is a woman online. This naturalizes the male/female binary for the opposition of people with penises (cis and trans alike) by people with vaginas or, more

specifically, by those who were born with vaginas. As a result, genitals become the body in interactions perceived as sexual. Members use this binary to develop a specific kind of feminism for cis women to achieve agentic embodiment away from heterosexuality.

Biology and identity once again collide so that members either accept or reject others' identity claims. Here, trans women in “dresses and lipstick” are seen as messengers of patriarchy who do not “prioritize women.” Memes also tells stories about trans women that help to reinforce the sex/gender/(hetero)sexuality system through parodies. Online, memes take the form of pictures and text, usually meant to provide some comment on a political or sociological phenomenon. In one such meme, one blogger posted an image of Arnold Schwarzenegger in a blonde wig with the Venus or “female” symbol imprinted on his sunglasses. Underneath, the caption read, “The thing that won’t die, in the nightmare that won’t end.” Online, members no longer rely on the textual equation of trans women with “men in dresses” to uphold the binary. Instead, virtual spaces allow members to visually construct trans women as hyper-masculine cis men who pose an imaginary threat to feminist spaces. However, in this integrated space, narratives compete as anyone can participate in the telling of stories. One blogger who appears as feminist, but decidedly oppositional to radical feminism, writes:

I wonder what these cis lesbians would say about a trans woman with a vagina... in my personal life [I] have witnessed a lesbian who I know to subscribe to radical lesbian theory dating a trans man—which makes me consider that many radical lesbians on and offline have terrible shitty things to say about trans women but nothing to say about trans men – That-mouthy-christian

Biology-based criteria are used to determine how trans men fit into women-only spaces and interactions so as not to produce gender panics. While trans men might possess the “cultural genitals” to support their social identities as a men (e.g., facial hair, defined pectorals, etc.) (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), the perception of a vagina eases any threats of heterosexuality.

Without a penis, trans men are not associated with power and danger and not deemed a threat to either women-only spaces or their associated identities. Whether real or imagined, these scenarios produce meaningful consequences for how insiders and outsiders think about gender.

Members also support their efforts to determine gender based on imagined situations with both trans women and each other as these interactions take place exclusively online. One #radicalfeminism blogger wrote that “Ya’ll should virtually hug me cause I just fought a long and grueling battle about the important of penis-free bathrooms as safe spaces for women. HUG ME MY SISTERS” (lolliguncula, Tumblr). Online, “sisterhood” is virtual as bloggers develop emotion discourse dependent on expectations, standards, and ideas about how, when, and to whom emotional connections are deemed feminist. While these tactics depart from the use of academic theory, the use of emotion is also strategic in producing effective and exclusionary communication. Once again, the penis becomes an imagined source of danger to women and children who seen as defenseless and it is, in part, these particular ways of feeling that influence communication and perpetuate social conflict. In this case, if the penis has the power to undo women-only spaces, it is #radicalfeminism bloggers who describe themselves as the defenders of the narratives and spaces that allow “oppressed peoples... to feel some moments of freedom, create community, and overcome submissive and self-hating behavior” (transgender-harms-women, Tumblr). And, situated within a space where identities are fluid and that is, in many ways, without boundaries and physical bodies, Tumblrites posting on #radicalfeminism position themselves as uniquely qualified to determine gender and protect women.

Virtual Bodies: Integrated Spaces and the Maintenance of Radical Feminism

Salon feminists enforced their “no penises” rule by nominating members to ensure no “male images” found their way into their community newsletter. While trans women attended some in-person meetings, there is no evidence that the group was able to share their stories. In one edition, an apology was issued to the trans support group who attended Salon. It seems the group was unable to speak because “time ran out” (WEB August 2002). Unlike *Womyn’s Words*, however, there is no official “penis police” to edit Tumblr texts and images. Any blogger can add #radicalfeminism to her post to participate in how gender and feminism are outlined. Online, however, bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism attempt to coordinate and separate from the production of competing narratives using hashtags; however, trans women appear amid these micro-blogs by posting themselves and asserting their images. In response, #radicalfeminism bloggers build upon the work of scholars like Sheila Jeffreys to legitimate how they determine gender in this space. This is how they carry on the notion of the “penis police.” One blogger wrote, “In order to support transgenderism, gender has to be supported. So the subordination of women has to be supported in order for transgenderism to be supported” (Jeffreys, quoted in Tumblr).

This sets up Tumblr as a space of conflict or a battleground in which discursive wars are enacted. For instance, one trans women, user tonidorsay, wrote over a dozen posts and asserted images of her face and body in the radicalfeminism hashtag. This created a visceral experience online and became a way for members to construct alternative meanings in an integrated space. In one post, tonidorsay writes, “[Radical feminists] are conservative people who pretend to care about women, but really just want to tell them the ‘right way’ to live their lives.” In response, #radicalfeminism blogger the-feminist-spring, writes, “...sorry to burst your bubble, honey, but

women don't need men to validate their fight... if you're a man and want to be an ally, the best you can do is sit on the bleachers and support us; we don't want you to invade the stadium and start playing for us, because we can play by ourselves!" Continuing the back-and-forth discursive battle, another user who appears to identify as oppositional to radical feminism responded:

Do NOT visit the terf tag!.. They do not want EQUALITY they want SUPERIORITY. I am utterly stunned by these women (and possible men) who think there is nothing more to being a woman, to womanhood than a vagina. That all women can be boiled down to their nether regions. Stripped of all that makes them unique and reduced to a damn set of chromosomes and fucking fleshy crevice – cokearchy

An online feminist community popularized the term TERF (trans exclusionary radical feminist) in 2008 as a way of making the distinction between those who exclude trans women and those who don't. And, just as Tumblrites posting on #radicalfeminism largely rely on biology to determine gender, trans activists posting in the same hashtag attempt to downplay the importance of genitals in identifying women and men. While the "more to being a woman" is not defined, determining gender moves into the realm of identity rather than biology as these TERF wars rage on. Indeed, cokearchy also places ownership over exclusionary radical feminism in the hands of both women and men in order to highlight how heterosexuality informs women-only spaces. Gender, and femininity in particular, is no longer tied to the body, but remains a rallying point for community in which women can achieve recognition. In addition, these battle-style debates highlight the ways in which feminists engage in the construction of imagined scenarios using gendered metaphors and how members construct boundaries around their ideologically spaces.

The public narratives of gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality have historical roots in the formation of women-only spaces. Whether it is the fear of unwanted heterosexuality or the notion that all bodies are heterosexual until they achieve agentic embodiment, feminists

construct spaces in response to this ruling concept. As one blogger wrote, “Gender is socially and politically very real and very deadly. It is *the* structure of women’s oppression.” However, as online sides are taken and boundaries are solidified, gender is once again prioritized to render all other categories invisible. As a result, it is up to outsiders to problematize this space. As one blogger who appears to be oppositional to radical feminism writes:

Radical Feminism is just an umbrella for straight, white, able 20-something middle-class cisgendered women to stand under with other straight, white, able 20-something middle-class cisgendered women and whine about how hard it is being a straight, white, able 20-something middle-class cisgendered woman... Radical Feminism is a country club. – twistedkate

It is impossible to determine how old Tumblr bloggers are in this space; however, given that the majority of Tumblr users are 18-29 (Costill 2014), we can assume that the majority of bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism are also in this age bracket. This offers scholars important data about how radical feminism is not only persisting online, but also how it is persisting from generation to generation. By tracing these interactions via historical and contemporary texts, we can also show how activists continue to engage in these battles again and again and how the prioritization of gender and exclusionary practices continue to limit the scope of some feminisms. Young radical-identified feminists, like their predecessors, continue to determine gender based on the conflated ideas about the body and identity using imagined scenarios in which trans women are the enemy.

Conclusion

I examine how self-proclaimed radical feminists take on the work of determining gender across different spaces and time using imagined scenarios in which ideas about cis men and trans women are conflated. While Westbrook and Schilt show how the criteria for determining gender

have moved away from biological determinism in certain scenarios, I show how some feminists continue to use biology to determine community membership as panic ensues. By relying on the logic of a binary and the public narratives of gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality, feminists also uphold the sex/gender/(hetero)sexuality system by disseminating those ideological codes that paint women as vulnerable and men as predatory. And, as we move from into online spaces, feminists continue to play the part of the “penis police” in order to exclude trans women and potential feminist allies. This finding is important for situating the body in any sociological analysis. As gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality continue to inform how these spaces are constructed, it is no wonder that trans-women’s membership is problematic.

Imagined scenarios and women’s fear is another important finding in this study. Once again, I’d like to emphasize that women do experience violence every day. Women are not only imagined as vulnerable in public spaces, but are absolutely susceptible to gendered violence in both public and private spaces. Women-only spaces were constructed to address these experiences and offered women a viable and safe alternative to integrated spaces. However, by constantly pointing to the gender binary – indeed the very extremes of that binary in which men are murderous rapists and women are helpless caretakers – exclusionary radical feminists not only support public narratives that essentialize bodies, but leave the problem of their experiences untouched, namely patriarchy. In invoking imagined scenarios, consciousness-raising is no longer used to coordinate women’s actual experiences as a way to locally produce and disrupt discourse, but instead feeds into the proliferation of ideological codes that typically appear as free-floating, but which become quite evident when essential gender is evoked to erect boundaries between insiders and outsiders. When Salon feminists told stories about their actual experiences with trans women (i.e., the above-mentioned interaction with Burkholder at

Michfest), members produced alternative meanings about lesbian's experiences that moved forward from the imagined scenarios that produced such embroiled battles later on.

Lived communities organized in print took on distinctive characters of feminists' work in the context of the social relations of patriarchy. Through their newsletters, members produced narrative heroines, plots, morals, and spaces that connected systems of logic with emotion discourse in the everyday. Online, what seems to have persisted in #radicalfeminism is the attention to theory. Users take up past narratives, including the heroines and morals of the past to reflect on the political abstractions that seem relevant in logic-centered claims. What seems to be missing is the sense of community. However, these methods of producing narratives by way of political abstractions make sense given that the audiences online are large, diverse, and also very abstract. Bloggers on #transfeminism do take up emotion codes to address the essential body and to write for audiences with complicated gender histories of their own. What is also missing is an experiential discussion of race and class. While there is talk of a need to center trans women of color within the hashtag, bloggers do not readily write from these experiences.

Lastly, original theories of radical feminism were also marked by a focus on sexuality, specifically in the pursuit of a distinctive practice produced by and for women. In print, Salon feminists initiated a "Sexuality Web" (WEB November 1983) as a way to discuss lesbian sex and to share their experiences in the form of poetry, song, and more. However, this endeavor was short-lived as members concentrated more so on the production of a sexual identity and community rather than on also incorporating ideas and practices about sexual pleasure. As Frye (1983) makes clear, lesbians of the time did not always articulate their desires because patriarchal language cannot account for lesbian love. However, just as Black radical-feminist poets like Audre Lorde wrote about her "flesh that hungers" and the "curve of your waiting

body” (Lorde 1970), it is perhaps white-cis-lesbian feminist communities like that of Salon in which women find it difficult to write about sexual acts.

Given the uniqueness of Tumblr, and online spaces more generally, it would seem as though this would be the perfect place to invent new ways of talking. However, this aspect of the original theories did not persist online either. So, while early radical-identified feminists achieved a unique sexual identity and community, these narratives did not translate online where “out” lesbians do not often identify themselves. Indeed, given the abundance of language and symbology for gay men’s sexuality (e.g., the hankie code of the 1960s and 70s – see Reilly and Saethre 2013), we can also see how public narratives influence the stories lesbians and feminists tell. What did persist, however, was a unique radical-feminist identity that depends on how bloggers distinguish themselves from perceived outsiders using public narratives of gender, essentialism, and heterosexuality.

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CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

NARRATIVE PRODUCTIONS OF GENDER AND ESSENTIALISM AND THE PERSISTENCE OF EXCLUSIONARY FEMINISMS

The sociological interest in gender and feminism is nothing new. As each of my preceding chapters suggest, many scholars have centered their studies on precisely these areas. However, through a textual analysis that focuses on the narrative productions of meaning, I have touched upon a vital moment when feminist organizing is changing form. Online, meanings about bodies, identities, and communication are circulating through the interactions of people trying to make sense of their experiences as they navigate the broader systems of power, culture, and discourse. It is here that previously taken-for-granted meanings are challenged within the context of a globalized and socially-fragmented world. But, during these “unsettled” times, we can also see how the “tool kit” of public communication contains fragments of the same type of heroes, plots, territories, and moral lessons that have been available to storytellers for generations. It is how and where we use them that have changed. While feminisms are meant to challenge hierarchies, activists also take from these broader systems of thinking and feeling to either transform or perpetuate the status quo. Indeed, just as sociologists are often reluctant to look beyond the present, it is in those spaces that divisions of today were just taking shape. And, through a comparison of the narrative productions within, we can see how the TERF wars began and how these exclusions persist.

This dissertation is particularly concerned with how activists preserve particular feminisms in the everyday. In this postmodern moment, virtual spaces are being formed, generations are shifting, and notions about gender and bodies continue to influence how communities mobilize around political discourse. Today as in the past, radical-identified feminists are challenging and taking up broader meanings about gender and essentialism to figure out what is wrong, who is to blame, and what is to be done in the social context of patriarchy. While original theories allowed feminists to question essential bodies, another trajectory formed in which participants critique how people assigned male at birth learn masculinity as tied to the oppression of women. Through separatism, lesbians created woman-centered communities in which members cared for one another and developed a culture all their own. While trans women may have wanted to join the lived communities of the past, those blogging online are telling their own stories and forming their own spaces. This is how trans-identified feminists are mobilizing online in defiance of those public and exclusionary-feminist narratives that conflate trans women and cis men.

What this dissertation does, however, is to tell a story. It begins as self-proclaimed radical feminists take up the written word to come out and, eventually, be out as lesbians. During the time frame in which Salon feminists began organizing, there was little opportunity for lesbian or feminist community in the area. However, as women began to write themselves into being using poetic and emotional writing, they also began to take up space previously occupied by patriarchy. Under separatism, they wrote for themselves and others who were presumed to understand these experiences to draw on narratives of home, belongingness, and feeling whole in order to center lesbians. This production of community extended into their conceptualization of liberation as they extended this frame into culture and care. While they separated because of their

unequal experiences in heteronormative culture, Salon feminists concentrated on political dissent rather than oppression as they took up the liberation frame to mobilize. Even the newsletter, *Womyn's Words*, became an active member as radical-identified feminists learned about business, money, and self-sufficiency. In effect, the textual coordination of lived spaces also allowed members to feel a sense of ownership over a communal space defined as Lesbian.

While the group's separatist tactics helped them to consciousness-raise about liberation and to politically dissent through the centering of "out" lesbians, however, their boundary-work relied on imagined scenarios kept perceived outsiders away. This work perpetuated the gender binary and, no matter how inadvertently, painted people assigned female at birth as vulnerable and those assigned male as predatory. This is how essential gender came to organize this lived community through text. And, given the time frame of their activism and the changing notions about what it means to be a "good" feminist, lived community members often turned to theory to understand how to determine gender in sexual or women-only spaces. Ideas about safety and bodies eventually occluded the problem of their experiences, namely patriarchy, and the invention of an alternative sexuality for women in this space – a radical-feminist mandate issued by their foremothers. While actual encounters with trans women defined these imagined scenarios, public narratives of gender and essentialism continued to circulate in the local space. And, just as members worked so hard to construct a positive "herstory" with *Womyn's Words*, Salon feminists' relentless boundary-work ultimately led to the expulsion of trans women and the eventual collapse of the community as essentialism prevailed.

Just as some declared radical feminism dead, however, its re-emergence online signifies the notion that movements never really start anew. While mass uprisings receive the most public attention, it is the community work of everyday activists that sustain movements beyond the

streets. However, how activists take up the work of past members in new spaces is important for how they think about and construct their versions of livable feminisms. And, while radical-identified feminists may have produced a distinctive sexual identity in the past, issues of lesbian sexuality are rarely discussed on Tumblr's #radicalfeminism. This shifts which discursive forms bloggers use to persuade and convince their perceived audiences that radical feminism is an effective form of mobilization. By telling stories about home, belongingness, community, and care, Salon feminists developed their own emotional culture in order to organize political dissent and to frame liberation through separatism. On the other hand, bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism find themselves amid a discursive battleground. And, because the audience is unknown and more diverse, bloggers use cultural themes of logic and academic theory to make claims about how the world works under patriarchy and how the world should work under their own brand of feminism.

Findings from the Substantive Chapters

The story of how exclusionary feminism persists from lived communities organized by text to online spaces sheds light on important findings from each of the three substantive chapters. First, just as the coming/being out narratives used by early radical-identified feminists in lived communities speak to an audience of cis lesbians, self-described trans feminists online write for an audience that spans cis and trans, as well as sexual orientation. However, both radical and trans-identified feminists use poetic and emotive writing as a way to depart from the logic of heteronormative culture. Early lesbian feminists in particular used poetry as a way to formulate a sexual identity. And, just as TERF wars rage on in terms of how self-described radical feminists determine gender and make claims about what is wrong, who is to blame, and what is to be done,

this finding gives reason for optimism. Indeed, while self-described radical and trans feminists often find themselves on opposite sides of so-called TERF wars over how gender is determined, their use of poetry as a consciousness-raising tool shows how both groups are creatively and similarly writing themselves into being. While radical-feminist ideas about “sex caste” work to exclude, perhaps the movement’s earlier project of “sex class” as it relates to social constructionism find more in common with the tenants of trans feminism than can be seen from the everyday.

Second, as liberation is framed, extended, and disputed over time, the focus on what is to be done is more effective for building lesbian-centered spaces than an exclusive or primary focus on oppression or the problem and who is to blame. While oppression highlights the relationship between women and men, the emphasis on political dissent helps lesbians build a community in which they feel a sense of ownership and control. Framing liberation in terms of culture and care through separatism or community-building offers participants a way to reject the space typically allotted women in patriarchal culture. Through the liberation frame, members begin to feel visible – not only in their own eyes as lesbian women, but also to each other as representative of a self-built community. Online, however, activists are writing for larger audiences who are more diverse and abstract. And, because Tumblr bloggers obscure their offline identities with anonymous user names, storytellers also may not have the support of lived communities. In this space, it is not the focus on political dissent, community, or sexual identity that persisted. Instead, public narratives about gender and essentialism continue to influence how bloggers construct their radical identities as feminists. Instead of “smashing patriarchy,” bloggers engage in TERF wars that are organized by ideas about essentialism and the “right” way *be* a feminist.

Lastly, when radical-identified feminists focus on biology and socialization, they not only exclude trans women and potential allies, but they also undo the work done to produce positive “herstories.” For instance, in writing themselves into being through poetry, lived communities disrupted ideas about the vulnerability of women in shared spaces. Likewise, by framing liberation in terms of culture and the care of other lesbians, participants showed how they did not need the protection of cis men – they could care for their own financial and emotional needs. However, in determining gender through ideas about bodies and through imagined scenarios with trans women, radical-feminist spaces defined by essentialism ultimately became unsustainable. Indeed, the work feminists did to empower one another did not match those ideas about women as vulnerable and in need of protection that were used to exclude perceived outsiders.

Overall Findings from the Dissertation

This study focuses on the comparison of two texts produced show how the boundary-work or TERF wars between members and other groups lead to the perpetuation of essentialism and exclusion. This dissertation reveals four important overall findings that synthesize what I found in each of the chapters. First, in both textual and virtual spaces, people use imagined and essential understandings of bodies where actual bodies are not present in order to exclude. *Womyn’s Words* and Tumblr seem to focus on suppositions about imagined bodily interactions that perpetuates fear, women’s vulnerability, and the gender binary. It is only when texts are coordinated through a reflection of actual encounters with trans women (i.e., Nancy Burkholder) do radical-identified feminists make room for trans women. So, while text coordinates ideas about bodies and bodies certainly retain their meanings even in online spaces, this study shows

how lived actuality is important for feminist mobilization that builds from (cis and trans) women's experiences.

Second, while the interactions with trans women were imagined, Salon feminists did interact in lived communities through separatism. In many ways, *Womyn's Words* is, at least in part, defined by its attention to the personal, lived experiences of its members. Woven together with poetry, short stories, and other creative ways of constructing narrative heroines, plots, morals, and spaces, the newsletter reflects how feminists can connect logic and emotions using the everyday. Indeed, the newsletter took on distinctive characters of Salon feminists' lived work in the context of the social relations of patriarchy. Online, however, what seems to have survived in #radicalfeminism is the attention to theory. Users take up past narratives, including the heroines and morals of the past to reflect on the political abstractions that seem relevant in logic-centered claims. What seems to be missing is the sense of community. However, given that the audiences online are large, diverse, and also very abstract, these methods of producing narratives make sense for effective and persuasive claimsmaking.

Third, early radical-feminist theories outlined how women could collectively wrestle sexual oppression away from men. However, these data do not reflect the invention of a unique women's sexuality in textual and virtual spaces. In community spaces like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival among others, lesbians produced workshops and demonstrations with sex toys and practices so that entire spaces were dedicated to sexual pleasure. In the documentary *After Stonewall* (Scagliotti 1999), women talked about how important poetry was in connecting with other women during the movements of the 1960s and 70s. And, in an interview published in the journal *Callaloo*, Audre Lorde said that "[m]y sexuality is part and parcel of who I am, and my poetry comes from the intersection of me and my worlds" (Rowell 2000, 61). Likewise, the

book, *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (2013), is one of the first written collectively about trans experiences. One of the contributors, trans-woman-poet Jennifer Espinoza, said, “[With poetry], it’s easier to say things that haven’t been put into words before” (Fitzpatrick 2015). However, it seems that reducing community to texts also removes the invention, production, and exploration of sexuality outside heteronormativity.

Lastly, while radical and trans-identified feminists often find themselves at odds, this study suggests that perhaps their consciousness-raising practices are more similar than we thought. Radical feminism grew largely out of the 1960s civil rights movement and women’s dissatisfaction with the “so-called male dominated liberation struggles” (Linden-Ward and Green 1993). Over the years and stemming from their work in other movements, radical-identified feminists like Shulamith Firestone, Kathie Sarachild, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Carol Hanisch, Judith Brown, and others developed a distinctive vocabulary to demand social change and to make sense of the way the world is organized that continues online. And, in many ways, self-described trans feminists like Emi Koyama and Julia Serano are growing the work other feminists have done to codify sexism to theorize about trans women’s experiences, including ideas like “oppositional sexism” or the belief that male and female and masculinity and femininity are exclusive categories (Serano 2007). In this way, the feminist lineage of narrative productions positions these two kinds of feminisms not as ideological distinct, but as stemming from practices both aimed at opposing and challenging patriarchy.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is related to individual members’ identities in terms of feminist stance, gender, sexual orientation, race, class, etc. While some storytellers identified themselves in terms

of radical or trans feminism, gender, and sexual orientation, others did not. More often than not, members also did not discuss personal issues of race and class. Based on the organizational structure of WEB, I do know that this community was by and for self-described radical lesbian feminists. And, from informal conversations I had with one of the founders of WEB, I also know that most members were white. On Tumblr, most bloggers only reference race, class, and sexual orientation theoretically in how these identities are important for feminism. However, as this study is about radical feminism and its persistence over time, the overarching identifying components of WEB make *Womyn's Words* a good resource for understanding how public narratives of gender and essentialism circulate through the stories they told in text. However, because I could not interview members or observe Salon meetings, I do not know what went on in face-to-face interactions. I can only make statements about how the lived community was present in text through references to those interactions, announcements about events, and so forth. This is a second limitation.

Lastly, my gender identity (female assigned at birth) and expression (feminine) afford me gender privilege in my everyday life and was a potential limitation within my analysis. If I leave my gender privilege unchecked, I run the risk of leaving those gender experiences that fall outside of my own unexamined. As a researcher, it becomes necessary to constantly examine our own privileges and to challenge the bias those privileges afford us. Reflexivity is an important tool in any research project, particularly in qualitative studies that require the interpretation of meaning. As the researcher, I decided what questions to ask from the data, how to code it, and the best way to present it on the page. All decisions that were made were influenced by my understanding of the existing literature and qualitative analyses. These decisions also came under

scrutiny during the revision process. However, all analysis, discussions, and conclusions are filtered through my experiences and knowledge, which is also a potential limitation.

A Final Word on Findings and Future Directions

Stories are not merely words on a page. They help us make sense of the world, build communities, and connect the past, present, and future. But, the characteristics of those stories that circulate most widely are those that make sense to the most people. They take up the heroes of the past who brave an uncertain and harsh world to triumph over their adversaries. So, in order to tell those stories and in order for them to appeal to a large, diverse, and potentially abstract audience, tellers must speak their language. And, for the most part, the public understands gender as an essential part of bodies. These are the stories that have the power to build up communities, to exclude and alienate, and to destroy. And, by tracing the narratives productions of these meanings over time and across space, sociologists can better understand how our shared cultural understandings persist. So, while feminism is an organized effort to undo the injustices of the past, activists must be aware of which tools are used in the struggle. It is not just those who seek to uphold the status quo that uses the language of gender and essentialism. Activists use these tools as well. In this sense, future studies could include comparative analyses of other feminist newsletters and online spaces to understand how different kinds of feminisms negotiate public conceptions of gender and essentialism. Given the newsletter platform in which many 1980s and 90s feminists wrote, is there *a* story that defined most persistent communities? And, given the dynamic virtual worlds in which feminists now find themselves, how does the platform (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr) alter that story? How do public narrative productions of

gender and essentialism circulate differently within those platforms? And, how does time matter? These are the questions I will continue to ask from these and other data.

Nonetheless, I am humbled by this research experience. The communities and spaces I studied comprise the historical work of self-identified radical lesbian and trans feminists who tackled sexism and the marginalization of lesbians and trans women. The creativity with which they actively produced narratives and the perseverance with which they advanced feminism demonstrates the possibility of different kinds of activism – organizing that centers cis and trans women alike. Their work provides the foundation – mistakes and all – from which feminists can liberate us. To close then, the study of the narrative productions of gender and essentialism over time is critically important to understanding how exclusionary feminisms persist. When we theorize about how public narratives circulate within the stories members tell, we expose how activists are impacted and, in turn, impact the world around them. This is necessary to understanding not only oppression, but also political dissent and liberation.

Gender and essentialism inform the world in which we find ourselves held accountable to the gender binary. Productive of and coordinated by public narratives, these broader meanings saturate the everyday to appear natural, but, to put it in terms of framing, they are indeed the “problem” that is to be “blamed.” We must remember that as we move more and more into the virtual realm. After all, logging onto social media or reading a blog is the modern version of sitting down at a café or on a public bench and watching people interact in everyday spaces. With the disappearance of informal public spaces, virtual spaces attempt to satisfy the hunger people have for companionship, shared identity, and, in some sense, boundaries. But, I argue that we must move toward something better, something livable. We must collectively organize for one another to be heard. We must be loud. And, we must talk about sex! It is an uphill battle.

And, as difficult as it is to perceive, we live in one of the most opportune moments in our collective histories. The spotlight is on us and the world has our ear. Perhaps trans feminism and radical feminism cannot be easily lumped together. Perhaps many of the foundational points wrapped up in theory each are inconsolable. We certainly all come to social movements with different life experiences. However, as women – cis lesbian and trans alike, don't we face all want to see the end of destructive normativities?

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