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Robert J. Hill

*PennState Capital College, USA*

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# Menacing Feminism, Educating Sisters

Robert J. Hill

PennState Capital College, USA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Transsexuals are engaged in a profusion of learning dynamics, critical education, oppositional practices and sense making. Male to female transsexuals (MTFs) especially struggle to define the boundaries of what it means to be a “woman.” The result is an emerging new feminism, called transfeminism that challenges the institutionalized gender system in a way that other discourses cannot. Transfeminism is part of a social movement that is taking up trans/gressive acts and constructing learning communities built on gender-identity difference.*

## Background

Western society is structured such that there exist: *women by chance* (genetic/biological; women-born-women), *women by choice* (transgendered and *transsexuals*, i.e. persons whose core gender identity differs from what is culturally associated with their biological sex at birth), and *women by force* (*intersexuals* whose anatomy is assigned at birth by coerced “normalization”).

Numerous individuals have engaged in the construction of feminist ideology since the 1960’s, producing strands identified as liberal-, radical-, socialist-, Marxist-, black-, lesbian-, cultural-, postmodern-, critical-, and cyber-feminism, to name a few (Whelehan, 1995; Brooks, 1997). This research unearths a new genre of feminism, constructed by *transsexual* and *intersexual* women, termed “transfeminism.” Transfeminism is a product of the trans- and inter-sexual communities constructing new meanings from their lived experiences. Transsexuals and intersexuals, nominally included in the queer community, are arguably the most marginalized group of gender outlaws (Feinberg, 1996). Hate crime violence is rampant against this segment of society. There is currently a powerful surge of trans-struggles positioning them within the borders of new social movements working for social change.

## Methods

This qualitative research investigated the ways that transsexual feminist knowledges are produced, used, and distributed in their contest for collective identity and control over their own lives. It also explored the relationships of trans-people to “non-transsexual” feminist discursive practices. Theoretical frameworks, upon which this research was

based, included new social movements as sites of learning where a pedagogy of contestation and rebellion are carried out; identity as a source of meaning and experience; and critical postmodern analysis to explore power asymmetries. Methods included a literature review of texts with subsequent analysis, a critical ethnographic qualitative survey, and the unique use of the Internet for survey/interview purposes.

Twenty-six transgendered folks were initially interviewed. Informants were selected from organizations dedicated to transsexual/transgender education and through “snow-ball” techniques. Respondents represented more male to female (MTF) transsexuals than other groups. Interviewees were culled to ten key trans-respondents who participated over a one-year period. Formal interviews, informal discussions, and other noninvasive techniques (snagging public email messages posted on the Internet) were used to capture data which were coded and analyzed for themes related to adult education in the transsexual community.

## Findings of the Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed several themes, including: transsexual/intersexual communities are engaged in a profusion of learning dynamics, oppositional practices and sense making. As women, MTF trannies struggle to write their own narratives, called *difference feminism* (Shalit, 1999). It, in part, rejects marginalization at the hands of society, including “Othering” from the straight, gay, and lesbian communities. Some respondents saw this new menacing feminism as the latest development of feminist thought. Trans/actional learning included educational dynamics within trans communities, and outreach to “non-trannies,” especially to “main-

stream” women feminists who frequently reject male to female transsexuals’ identity claims. Trans respondents noted that few people ask, “Who counts as a woman?” The literature produced by transfeminists revealed a battle over identity and naming.

Data show that: numerous organizations exist for education, support and advocacy in the transgender communities; the mainstream lesbian and gay communities have been obstacles to transsexual liberation; many “traditional” feminists have been especially troubling for and troubled by transfeminists; the transfeminist community is actively creating a narrative space not yet recognized in feminist theories; and, transsexual educational efforts are often specifically oriented as outreach to “our sisters.”

The transgender movement is polyvalent, encompassing enormous diversity within a unifying field surrounding gender. The antagonistic tendency of new social movements to produce and simultaneously deconstruct group identity (Gamson, 1998) is operative in the transgender movement. A tension exists between creating stable collective identities through an essentialised educational discourse on one-hand and blurring/deconstructing identity boundaries on the other.

### **Interview Findings**

Education was universally posited by the transsexual community as indispensable in the struggle for identity, acceptance and building an equitable society. The terms *education* and *learning* emerged as key words in transcribed interviews; concepts related to them dominated.

#### *To the Rescue: Trans/itional Sites and Trans/Actional Education*

The research located multiple transsexual sites and opportunities employed in the struggle for cultural authority against the hegemony of transphobic discourses. One wrote about the relationship between female transsexuals and other women, “There is no enemy. This is not war. This is a rescue mission.” It is a sortie to liberate their sisters. Another penned, “I will not fight [them]...I’ll do my best to educate them...” The education was trans/actional; one male-to-female transsexual wrote, “The women who socialized me taught me that sisterhood is fierce, not demure.” Another MTF extolled the virtues of sister-space saying, “After thousands of

years of patriarchy, we have found a special value in a place where women can be seen without the male gaze, and speak without the male ear.” Feminist music festivals with women-born-women-only admittance policies were major arenas where the struggle for acceptance and identity-recognition occurred. Educational programs and grassroots activism were key tools at these. Yet, not all transsexuals agreed to resist womyn-born-womyn policies at festivals, saying it is “a mistake for the trans movement to target [them]; they do not have the kind of institutional power that male establishments have. The real enemy...should be the patriarchal system rather than womyn-only events.”

One of the prospective educational avenues cited by a respondent was course work in “trans feminism.” Feminism itself is a difficult term to describe. As Whelehan (1995) writes, “Feminism is itself problematic, because the theories that inform it are heterogenous (p.25).” Yet, she has discovered that “all feminist positions are founded upon the belief that women suffer from systematic social injustices because of their sex and therefore, ‘any feminist is, at the very minimum, committed to some form of reappraisal of the position of women in society’” (Evans, in Evans et al. 1986, p. 2).

Koyama (1999), a respondent, wrote, “transfeminism cuts through all of the major themes of third wave feminism: diversity, postmodern identities, body image/consciousness, self-definition, and female agency.” It has been pointed out that this “is not merely about merging trans politics [with] feminism, but it is a critique of the second wave feminism from third wave perspectives.” Koyama also points to the diverse strands of “transfeminism.” Trans feminism has at least two distinct expressions in the trans community. One is the application of feminist perspectives to trans discourse, aptly called “transsexual feminism.” Transsexual feminism is premised on an extrinsic acceptance of transsexuals as women. A second manifestation is “transfeminism.” This strand is more than a transsexual reading of feminism. It is about establishing transfeminism within the mainstream of feminism with specific content that relates to transsexuals’ experiences, but which is applicable to all women. Transfeminism has characteristics unique and special to the trans community. Both strands of trans feminism challenge the rigorously policed links between biological sex and gender. When articulated, these trans/visions make

the family of feminisms richer.

### *A Menacing Feminism*

In a flier distributed at a women's music festival, two gender outlaws with divergent beliefs wrote, "in defying [a rigid, destructive, and archaic gender system] we learn to convert fear into anger [and] this makes us dangerous (Dobkin & Wilchins, 1995)." Califia (1997) notes that, "Nothing upsets the underpinnings of feminist fundamentalism more than the existence of transsexuals. MTF trans members are engaged in informal education for control and ownership of the meaning of "woman." They are employing transfeminist discourse as a counter-hegemonic practice. Transfeminism, a menacing feminism, is *pro-feminist* (supportive of) as well as *proto-feminist* (archetypal; a prototype of feminism). Transsexual feminists articulate that transfeminism exemplifies the kind of self-determination that is a prerequisite of feminism. It is proto-feminist in that it critiques mainstream notions of masculinity. It is profeminist in that it takes up the sentiment that women deserve equal rights and that gender is a patriarchal social construct used to oppress women.

### *Education as a "Right to be Myself"*

One wrote, "The mission of [several organizations cited] is to educate society about Trans/Intersex issues." Targets of educational campaigns varied. In some instances it was "the feminist community," while in others it was education at "women centers." At times participants built trenches of resistance and survival in the emergence of identity politics. Other times, they built new identities that redefined their social roles while seeking social transformation. Pedagogical trans-tools, in addition to collective action at music festivals, differed widely. Strategies involved: dialog; effective use of the media, such as appearances on talk-radio and TV shows; authoring columns for the pulp press and on-line journals; networking (especially electronically); linking with sympathetic non-trans organizations; "camp behavior;" political activity, election to community Boards of Directors; joining peer groups at sexual minority centers; forming panels/speakers bureaus; Websites; and permeating reading groups at commercial bookstores. Many paralleled Gramsci's "war of position" (1971) in order to counter or replace the dominant hegemony.

Outreach education to trans youth has become an increasingly important endeavor as well.

### *Education as a Rite to be Themselves*

For MTFs, education in the trans community is a rite of passage into female adulthood. This is especially important given the absence of intervening stages that most genetic women travel during their childhood and adolescent development and female social enculturation. For some adults, it is a crash course in the pursuit to appear like they feel—as a woman. Educational literature is replete with advertisements to assist a transitioning person to be the woman of her dreams. Topics for self-directed learning projects include voice lessons and instructions in femininity such as contemporary women's fashions. To be "style-clueless" is a trans/gression to be avoided. The group *Renaissance*, an education and support organization, is one of many that are educating transsexuals. Their newsletter stated, "keep in mind some of our overtly feminine gestures and postures we affect as part of our own ritual are actually designed to attract...partners" (Amberle, 1996, p. 8). Many MTFs challenge the feminist objection to becoming an object of desire; the art of promenading is a ritual that allows the actor to gaze and to be a spectacle, an object of another's gaze.

Some MTF transsexuals exaggerate traditionally feminine traits—traits that some forms of feminism have repudiated. "Passing" is critical to the process of transitioning. As a result there is contention in expressing notions of beauty, femininity and the construction of the "female body" between some feminists and some transsexuals. Certain feminists challenge cultural and ideological formations of "the feminine" and reject the marginalizing status of femininity. Not so many transsexuals. Some seem to worship normalized female beauty as they struggle to make their appearance coterminous with their self-perception. In her book *Crossing*, McCloskey (1999) points to many reasons why MTF transgender individuals learn stereotypical feminine gestures. Her answer is simple: it's an act of deployment! To the charge that the gender crosser is perpetuating offensive clichés, she replies, "It's to keep from getting murdered, dear. Get it!" (2000).

*Being Out: A Pedagogy of Presence; Reaching Out: A Pedagogy of Praxis*

Being “Out,” was regarded as a quintessential educational device. This particular approach to adult education was not located in specific places or sites, but instead was based on a set of common understandings and principles precisely taught through exposure to new ideas, dialog and the shared experience of presence. One person opined, “the best gender-education...[is for trans-people to become] more common images.”

Most respondents agreed that in addition to being-out, “reaching-out” was essential. Reaching out was about making connections to communities. One claimed, “As the partner of an MTF, everyday is like educating the public just walking down the street.” Out/reach was a key activity used to: become known; ease fear; advocate for social change and challenge medical policy; provide or receive medical information; access information on constructing femininity; and seek justice and safety. The role of education in the emergence from gender confusion to personal responsibility was sometimes cited. Of significant concern to the transsexual community was the frequency of hate crimes, including violent death, to which members were subject. Out reach often surrounded this theme.

*Balance and Unity*

Multiple, and at times contentious, meanings emerged around the construction of a stable trans group-identity that was produced for consumption and distribution in the public sphere. The term, “educating our sisters” thus had various expressions and a fuller meaning than to provide learning opportunities for non-tranny feminists alone. It also meant educating MTF transsexuals. After an activist event one wrote, “[This] was an important education for me about TG [transgender]/TS [transsexual] issues, and started me on my own path to transition.” Calls for unity were exemplified by the claim, “Being gender-different is not just a ‘trans right,’ it is a women’s right too...Discrimination against any woman must always be contested.” The simultaneous intersection of collective identity and difference adds to the critical-postmodern theorization of transsexualism.

*Differences*

There were frequent remarks about generation differences; some self-identified “older” transsexuals

attributed progress to the attitudes of younger generations. One wrote, “I notice that my younger friends accept gender-bending of all kinds more readily, so I think that there is generational change coming.” This belief was echoed by a 41-year-old self-described MTF transitioning lesbian feminist, “Younger dykes play with gender with a breathtaking forthrightness which I find invigorating.”

Regionalism appeared to play some role in the type of education in which transsexuals engaged. One transsexual, writing from North Carolina stated that “here, there is no education [going on]...education is something that occurs in larger cities with more diversity.”

Although this study did not examine class and economic issues, some respondents’ comments—and trans community literature suggests—that both topics merit deeper exploration. For the economically disadvantaged, seemingly a disproportionate number who are people of color, money for identity and body reconstruction is often out of reach. As one interviewee wrote, “economics is a central theme in any trans activism.”

**Trans/Actional Adult Education**

Adult education has a venerable and long history and commitment to political action and social transformation. This study, in part, positions direct action as a pedagogical tool, locates transsexuality as a site of learning in adulthood, and situates it as a place for knowledge- and meaning-making. It captures an under-investigated new social movement that has taken up trans/gressive acts and constructed learning communities built on difference. Too, mainstream adult education has been heavily influenced by feminism(s). Only recently has it been challenged by the postmodern project of “messing” with the boundaries of sexual orientation (Hill, 1995; 1996), but it has yet to address gender orientation in any significant way. bell hooks (1994) reminds us that the feminist movement has been notorious for its censorship and exclusionary behavior, and proposes that it will grow and mature only to the degree that it passionately welcomes and encourages, in theory and practice, diversity of opinion, new ideas, critical exchange, and dissent. Eisenstein (1991) criticizes feminism for becoming respectable, drifting from its radical roots. Trans-feminism opens up new possibilities for feminist debate; it will help mainstream feminisms to regain their lost rebellious center and subversive quality.

Too, it will reshape the impact of inclusionary feminisms on adult education.

### **A Postscript on Electronic Trans/mission**

The Internet and web-based learning play vital educational roles in the transsexual community. Electronic bulletin boards, listservs, and chat-areas are central to the construction of new knowledges. Because cyber-activism is critical to trans education, it is a ready-made tool for researchers. This study opens up the possibility for an additional computer application in adult education: interactive, computer-mediated communications as an interview technique. While the use of the Internet in ethnography has been explored in a limited way elsewhere (Markham, 1998), this study suggests that on-line data retrieval and computer communications are underutilized instruments for data gathering with action-oriented subjects. Electronic telecommunication networks have not been thoroughly critiqued as new ethnographic tools for qualitative research. Advantages of screen-based techniques include: communication at unprecedented speed; adult educators are unbounded by physical location or certain personal limitations; and meaningful expansion of social interactions. Disadvantages of electronic communications encompass the filtering out and alteration of much of the nuance, warmth, and contextuality that seem important to fully human, morally engaged interaction (Sclove, 1997); and the interviewees' environments, often read as a text by critical ethnographers, are missing. Additionally, only those on the wealthy side of the "electronic divide" in society will be reached.

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be posted to 412 Parkside Road, Camp Hill, PA 17011-2127 or <enviroconsult@mindspring.com>. Contact author for glossary of terms. A complete article on this topic by the author can be found on the E-zine, *J. of Community Discourse*, Spring 2000, Vol. 1(3) at <<http://iml.umkc.edu/jcd>> .