

Queering Feminism: Rejecting Imperialist Methods of Silencing

By Mikayla Burress

ABSTRACT. This paper examines how certain non-trans feminist discourses silence transpersons and reinforce heteronormativity. Relying on recent feminist epistemology, I argue that the silencing of transgender persons constitutes both epistemic and ethical injustice. Epistemic injustice occurs when transpersons are invalidated as knowers and marginalized in epistemic communities established by feminists. The ethical injustice is produced by reinforcing the oppressive norms of heteronormativity. In the second half of this essay I rely on the assumption that there is an intimate connection between feminist and transgender studies—that is, there are grounds for non-trans and trans feminist solidarity and an imperative to make feminism more hospitable to transpersons. Drawing upon queer theory and trans scholarship, I conclude by suggesting how feminism can become more inhabitable for transpersons by adopting an antifoundationalist approach to coalition building.

Introduction

Recent theoretical work in feminist epistemology contends that social disadvantages produce unjust epistemic environments that exclude women and racial minorities. Feminist epistemologists like Miranda Fricker, José Medina, and Kristie Dotson have elucidated the imbrication of epistemic injustice and social stigmatization—that is, women and racial minorities disproportionately experience epistemic injustices due to social prejudices that wrongly demarcated these groups as untrustworthy, unknowledgeable, and intellectually inferior (Fricker 2007,

Dotson 2011, Medina 2013). While this work indisputably has opened up new a domain of epistemological inquiry, it lacks an analysis of how cisgender privilege affects epistemic interactions and contributes to the marginalization of trans and genderqueer persons.¹⁵ In this paper I am interested in examining how cis-, or non-trans feminists commit epistemic injustices against transpersons. Specifically, I elucidate how non-trans feminists' deployment of essentialist rhetoric silences trans voices and reinforces heteronormativity—which, I argue, constitutes epistemic and ethical injustices. Additionally, I suggest how feminism can become more inhabitable for transpersons. My central aim is to elucidate the need for non-trans and trans feminist solidarity. I write this essay as a white, Anglo, cis-woman. This essay reflects my commitment eliminating trans-exclusion within feminist spaces and is a personal attempt to think through the meaning of transphobic discourses amongst non-trans feminists.

Epistemic Violence, Essentialist Rhetoric, and Trans Exclusion

Essentialism relies on the contention that a casual relationship exists between biological sex and gender expression, or as Judith Butler explains, it is “the notion of an essential gender cored tied in some irreversible way to anatomy and to a determinist sense of biology,” (2001, 625). Essentialist rhetoric anchors some feminists' justifications for trans-exclusion. Janice Raymond uses essentialist reasoning to argue that trans-women cannot be considered *de facto* women because they were not born with female anatomy or socialized into feminine norms

¹⁵ The term 'cisgender' calls attention to the privilege possessed by normatively gendered subjects, or those who experience comfortability and ease performing the gender that they were assigned at birth (Shotwell & Sangrey 2009, 67).

during childhood: “Central to Raymond’s work is the invalidation of trans self-identification, justified through appeal to karyotype and history of social experience as belonging to a particular sex,” (Bettcher & Garry 2009, 2). While this line of reasoning may seem outdated, it is still employed to authorize “women-born-women” spaces (Shotwell & Sangrey 2009, 61). Julia Serano, a trans-woman who has written extensively about feminism’s exclusionary practices, describes her experience at a conference where essentialist remarks made her and other transpersons feel unwelcome:

...[the keynote speaker] referred to herself as a ‘bio-dyke’ and defined that as someone who is born female and who is attracted to other women who are born female...I may be a trans-woman, but the last time I checked, I was not inorganic or nonbiological in any way...I found the atmosphere and rhetoric in that room to be intolerable. (2012, 179)

Serano’s experience illuminates yet another manner in which trans-women are conceptualized as unnatural because they are not born with female genitalia. Finally, essentialism grounds the assumption that all female-to-male (FTM) transpersons will perform patriarchal masculinity by virtue of identifying as male, suggesting that behavior shares a casual relationship with gender and that masculine gender expression is inexorably patriarchal. Jacob Hale describes this phenomena by recounting their experience at a feminist conference, “a feminist philosopher told me that now that I was a man I seemed all too ready to take up too much verbal space... [my] transsexual subject position was *reduced* to nontranssexual manhood,” (2009, 52; my emphasis). While certainly not all non-trans feminists engage in this kind of divisive discourse—those who do foreclose transpersons from feminist spaces in ways that are evocative of the exclusion of women of color in early feminist movements.

In the remainder of this section, I examine how essentialist rhetoric silences trans voices within feminists spaces and argue that practices of silencing constitute epistemic and ethical injustices. In “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” Kristie Dotson characterizes epistemic injustice as a type of violence that damages a group’s ability to speak and be heard and argues that epistemic injustices are due to pernicious ignorance, “any reliable ignorance that, in given context, harms another person,” (2011, 238). What is absent from Dotson’s account of epistemic injustice is the function that group identity plays, a point that Miranda Fricker articulates in her expanded account of epistemic injustice by writing:

...the injustice cuts him to the quick. Not only does it undermine him in some capacity (the capacity for knowledge) that is essential to his value as a human being, it does so on grounds that discriminate against him in respect of some essential feature of him as a social being. (2007, 54)

Fricker’s account of epistemic injustice is conceptualized as a group’s inability to speak and be heard that is not only due to ignorance, but it is also inextricably linked to the pervasive influence of social stigmatizations—that is, the epistemic injustice occurs because some category of social identity (race, sexuality, gender, religion, etc.) that is integral to the groups self-identification is stigmatized and rendered epistemically invalid. Thus, the epistemic injustice enacted against transpersons—i.e. silencing—occurs precisely because trans-women identify (or are identified) as *trans*-women. With this expanded notion of harm in place, I can now specify the nuances of the silencing that non-trans feminists engage in when utilizing essentialist rhetoric.

Dotson articulates two practices of silencing that constitute epistemic injustices: testimonial smothering and testimonial quieting. My analysis focuses on how testimonial smothering is practiced by non-trans feminists

who employ essentialism. Testimonial smothering occurs when a speaker truncates their own testimony because they perceive that listeners are unwilling to appropriately respond, demonstrates an inability to understand the content of the testimony, or holds a pernicious ignorance, (Dotson 2011, 244). Testimonial smothering is exemplified by Julia Serano's experience of unease sharing her history in feminist spaces:

Sometimes I find it difficult to talk about my very different history—specifically, the fact that I was socialized male (or, as I put it, forced against my will into boyhood)—because it is so often cited by trans-misogynistic women as evidence that I do not belong in lesbian or women's spaces, because I am not a 'real' woman. (2012, 179)

Serano's narrative speaks to the three perceptions that induce testimonial smothering: 1) she recognizes that trans-misogynistic women refuse to appropriately respond to her testimony; 2) there is an inability to understand the context of Serano's testimony because trans-misogynistic women refuse empathize with trans-women; 3) there is a pernicious ignorance present—namely, the false conception that Serano is not 'a real woman' or that she 'does not belong in women's spaces' because her karyotype and adolescent social experience are male. The notion that trans women are not 'real women' is a pernicious ignorance because it is epistemically harmful insofar as it excludes, invalidates, and erases the knowledge of trans women; Additionally, this ignorance ignores the oppression and injustice that trans-women endure indubitably because they are identified as women and they inhabit a sexist society.¹⁶

¹⁶ I am not implying that trans-women are the only trans or genderqueer persons that endure testimonial smothering. As I mentioned before, the false belief that masculine gender expression is inexorably patriarchal endures the same phenomena and should be considered an ignorance because it erases the sexist oppression that FTM transpersons have

Pernicious ignorance and the testimonial smothering that often accompanies it constitute and ethical harm in the following way: the epistemic privilege that transpersons may possess is silenced; silencing the knowledge the transpersons possess contributes to the perpetuation of heteronormativity, which constitutes an ethical harm insofar as the system of heteronormativity regulates, disciplines, and oppresses transpersons.

According to standpoint theory, silencing discredits the epistemic privilege that lived experience *may* afford transpersons because of their social position as transgender.¹⁷ Alison Wylie articulates standpoint theory's central insight by writing:

...those who are subjected to structures of domination that systemically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, be epistemically privileged in some crucial respect. *They may...know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience.* (2003, 26; my emphasis)

By contending that transpersons may have epistemic privilege, I mean that transgender persons are ideally situated to critique the social structures and practices that perpetuate hierarchical, dichotomous gender because they have less social and political privilege than cis-presenting, non-transgender feminists—meaning, they have more opportunities to develop the critical consciousness that is

experienced: “Many FTMs have experienced sexist oppression and violence both before transition and also after (when taken to be ‘really a woman’),” (Bettcher & Garry 2009, 5).

¹⁷ There is a condition placed on the epistemic privilege that transpersons have due to the fact that epistemic privilege is not granted solely by occupying a marginalized social position—rather, one must also develop a critical consciousness in order to critique the norms that enacted marginalization. This can be done by inhabiting a non-normative community that does not adhere to dominant understandings; occupying such a community provides the opportunity to compare and contrast the dominant views with alternative, subaltern understandings the social order.

necessary to critique heteronormative and essentialist discourses. Phrased differently, transgender individuals are best situated to critique what Judith Butler calls “the matrix of cultural intelligibility,” or the set of norms that place masculinity, maleness, and manhood on top of the gender hierarchy, while maintaining the relationship between “biological sex, culturally constituted gender, and... the ‘effect’ of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice,” (Butler 1990, 23). This is because the very existence of transgender beings challenges the dominant assumption foundational to the matrix of cultural intelligibility—namely that sex, gender, and sexuality are correlating, natural facts. Melissa Vick contends that transpersons’ epistemic privilege is rooted in the experiences that they’ve gathered while inhabiting different gendered positions:

Their crossing of gendered epistemic position...[which] can make visible to them assumptions, especially concerning the character of gender - its naturalness and its binary character—shared by both men and women whose gendered positions and identities have rarely, if ever, been in question, and who have had little or no opportunity to know the world from the position of their gendered ‘other.’ (2012)

Vick illuminates how transpersons may inhabit an epistemically privilege positions due to the knowledge gathered from their experience of occupying different (sometimes contrasting) social positions as well as the unique oppressions that are suffered by trans and genderqueer persons. Stone notes the liberatory possibilities of transpersons’ lived experience when she writes “...in the transsexual’s erased history we can find a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender, which originates from within the gender minority itself and *which can make common cause with other oppositional discourses*,” (2006, 230; my emphasis). Thus, when non-trans feminists silence trans feminists they are

perpetuating the amoral, oppressive regulatory systems that they desire to challenge; furthermore, because they are perpetuating the oppressive gender regulatory system, non-transgender feminist who engage in silencing practices share moral culpability for the harms produced by that system—namely, the regulation of gender expression, disciplining of gender transgressors, and the invalidation of transpersons existence.

The silencing of transpersons and exclusion impedes the formation of relations of solidarity and erases the intimate connections that exist between trans and feminist studies. Leslie Feinberg describes how trans-exclusionary practices perpetuate heteronormative oppression: “Like racism and all forms of prejudice, bigotry towards transgendered people is a deadly carcinogen. We are pitted against each other in order to keep us from seeing each other as allies,” (2010, 143). It is only when non-trans and trans feminists work together as allies that we will engage in productive critiques of the regulatory regimes that hierarchize masculinity, manhood, and maleness because these constructs have not been created solely in relation to womanhood, womanliness, and femininity—but in opposition to *all* other gender embodiments.

In this section I have contended that the existence of essentialist ideology within feminism alludes to the challenges that transpersons face when confronting some non-trans feminists or entering feminist spaces laced with essentialist rhetoric. The alienating barriers erected by feminists that deploy essentialist reasoning point toward the need to reconsider the category of ‘real women,’ especially since, “...the very existence of trans people reveals the simplistic and false nature of the traditional categories of sex and gender,” (Bailey 2009, 182). Additionally, the category ‘real women’ needs to be reconsidered because it reinforces heteronormativity by assuming that there is a natural connection between the genitalia that one is born with and the gender that one

expresses. Lastly, essentialism promotes the silencing of transpersons, resulting in the invalidation of the epistemic privilege that transpersons may have by virtue disrupting assumptions that are foundational to the matrix of cultural intelligibility.

In the next section of this paper, I suggest that non-trans feminists can actively create more hospitable feminist spaces for transpersons by shifting towards a *postfeminism*, a feminism that does not rely on fixed identity categories.

Queering Feminism: An Antifoundationalist Approach

The epistemic injustices produced by essentialist rhetoric introduce an imperative to rethink the concept of 'women' as feminism's starting point since such a narrow starting point serves as an impetus for marginalization and exclusion of transpersons. Serano notes the importance of expanding the category on which feminism bases its community by writing, "...community is not so much about surrounding myself with people who are 'just like me' but about learning from and supporting others who share issues and experience that are similar (yet somewhat different) from my own," (2012, 178). Serano's conception of community also points towards an important contention that must be raised: while trans issues and feminist issues possess their own nuanced foundations, they are imbricated enough to argue that trans issues are feminist issues and vice versa.

Just as the Women of Color Feminism movement taught us that we must not assume that the concept of woman is a unified category, we must also not make essentialist assumptions about transpersons and their relation to the dubious category of 'real women.' These assumptions will only ostracize the very persons with which we should be coalition building. Antifoundationalist coalition politics refuses to assume that "identity" can be generalized. Rather, identity concepts are left open, allowing them to continually shift in resistance to totalizing,

hegemonic, imperialistic, and normalizing conceptions. A coalition based on shifting, un-foreclosed identity concepts engage in the ethic of coalition that María Lugones articulates when she urges us to maintain differences in order to build relations of solidarity that are rooted in difference:

The emphasis is on maintaining multiplicity at the point of reduction, not in maintaining a hybrid, but in the tense workings of more than one logic, not to be synthesized but gone beyond... *the logic of coalition at the colonial difference is constituted by a rejection of dichotomous constructions of realities.* The multiplicity is never reduced. (2012, 85)

By rejecting dichotomous constructions of reality, antifoundationalist politics rejects the matrix of culturally intelligibility's foreclosure of identity expression. Maintaining multiplicity makes feminist spaces inhabitable for those who fall outside the confines of normative discourse by enabling us to connect with one another through points of solidarity without reducing our own uniquenesses.

Creating inhabitable feminist coalitions requires that we recognize that dialogue is filled with cultural assumptions and power relations—meaning, each member of a dialogue is not socially situated in sameness (Butler 1990, 20). Rather, the members of dialogue are always speaking from different social positions that will either enhance or limit their ability to be understood or silenced. Thus, we must make a concerted effort to recognize those who are speaking from the decentralized position that Hale calls “the dislocated space of the margins,” the spaces that those who are culturally unintelligible inhabit (Hale 2009, 58). Recognizing those who are located in the dislocated space of the margins involves choosing to move towards the margins so that the center becomes a place where excluded voices are validated and heard; centralizing marginalized voices demands that those who are relatively

privileged inhabit the margins as a learner, listener, and ally. Utilizing an antifoundationalist coalition strategy, feminism becomes a “queer feminism”: a feminist that does not establish the category “woman” as its core aspect, rather its core aspect becomes the unstable category of “gendered other”, all subjectivities and embodiment that are constructed in opposition to dominant masculinities.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that non-trans feminists use of essentialism has actively silenced transgender persons, constituting epistemic and ethical harms. Furthermore, marginalizing essentialist rhetoric signifies the need to foster epistemically responsible relations between non-trans and trans feminists—that is, the deployment of essentialism constitutes an epistemic injustice, illuminating the need for non-trans feminist to create more trans-inclusive environments. By appealing to standpoint theory, I have iterated the importance of making feminism more hospitable for transgender people; namely, feminists aim to critique and dismantle the gender binary that hierarchizes masculinity, manhood, and maleness—but this will only be achieved by halting silencing practices that erase the knowledge transgender persons have by virtue of challenging the regulatory matrix of cultural intelligibility. I urge non-trans feminists to recall that the construct ‘man’ is not hierarchized solely in relation to ‘woman’; rather it is constructed in relation to all othered gender embodiments. Finally, I suggested that feminism move towards a queer feminism that relies on antifoundationalist coalition politics, a politics in which feminism’s core aspect is the ever-changing category of gendered other. Queer Feminism recognizes the truth of Audre Lorde’s famous assertion:

“the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”¹⁸

Mikayla Burress studies Philosophy with a concentration in Bioethics at the University of Louisville. Her research interests include queer embodiment in the prison industrial complex (PIC), health inequality, healthcare within the PIC, and feminist epistemology. After graduating next spring, Mikayla hopes to attend a graduate program in Political Philosophy or Critical Theory.

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