

For a *Critical Radical Feminism*:
An Open Letter to Lierre Keith from a Former Sister-in-Arms
February, 2014
University of Oregon

Dear Lierre,

It's been about a hundred years since we've talked. 1989 I think. After the dissolution of our radical lesbian activist group in Northampton, Massachusetts, where the older feminists rolled their eyes and called us the "Young Revolutionaries," albeit with affection. Now we're the older feminists and you're here, on the campus of the university where I teach and work, in the community where I make my home and live my life and try to still make some small difference where I can.

I've been very distantly aware of your work over the years, someone told me about the book against vegetarianism (from a former militant vegetarian!) I was happy to hear you were rethinking things, as all of us, I hope, have been. But then last week students started coming to me and asking me if I knew about the "controversy" over your visit, so I had to find out what all the fuss was about.

When I read the statement about trans issues which is circulating in the blogosphere, and which Rachel Ivy reads aloud in the video of her presentation on gender, also circulating on the blogosphere, I thought a lot about whether or not to say something, write something, in response. At first I decided not to—too messy, too much stress and I've got more than enough of that—then I thought about my trans students and what this event of your coming to town might mean to them, and, well, here I am writing you this open letter.

First let me say I don't support those who wanted to rescind your invitation to speak. I don't think you get "safe space" in the public sense from not being subjected to attacks, or to the presence of those by whom you consider yourself to have been attacked. I think you get "safe space," or as safe as space gets, from having your community stand by you in the face of attacks.

I've entitled this letter "For a Critical Radical Feminism," because I am dismayed by how uncritical "Radical Feminism," or those who claim that name, have been over the last 32 years—especially on this issue. You say in your statement, "I've personally been fighting about this since 1982." That's 32 years! Now let me say for the benefit of the community here, everything you then proceed to say about trans issues was utterly familiar to me, both from having heard those things said and having said them myself back in the mid-80s when we met, when we hammered out our "gender analysis" in the study groups we held, reading Monique Wittig and Maria Mies and Collette Guillaumin—thinkers I still teach, by the way. We hammered out our gender analysis which was that gender is a term that names a material relation of power in which women are subordinated to men. There are no women without men like there are no slaves without masters, as Wittig taught us.

But then there was the trans issue, which back then was brand new for most of us. I think it freaked us out, frankly, because it didn't match the analysis. So we tried to make it match the analysis. Somehow this notion of gender as a sex-class system had to mean that those assigned to be men at birth who wanted to disown that assignation were trying to claim a subordination that they hadn't experienced, were denying a kind of privilege that their gender-assignation had bestowed on them. Somehow it had to mean they were trying to invade our space (again), just when we'd finally been able to claim it for ourselves—the imperative to penetrate taken to a whole new level. You say in your statement, "I think 'transphobic' is a ridiculous word. I have

no strange fear of people who claim to be 'trans.'" Maybe we weren't afraid of the people so much as we were afraid of the *phenomenon*. Why? Because if gender is a sex-class system, and that's all it is, there is no way to explain the existence of trans women at all. That's like white people trying to get into slavery in the south of the 1840s. If gender is a sex-class system, and if that's all it is, then the only "trans" should be female to male, because everybody should be trying to get out and nobody should be trying to get in—yet it's the transition from male to female that is cited as troubling.

That's why your first analogy doesn't work: "*Try this on. I am a rich person stuck in a poor person's body. I've always enjoyed champagne rather than beer, and always knew I belonged in first class not economy, and it just feels right when people wait on me. My insurance company should give me a million dollars to cure my Economic Dysphoria.*" You've got the movement going in the direction of more power not less. It's a reverse analogy passed off as a simple analogy. The analogy would be, I'm rich, but I've always identified as poor, so I divest myself of my wealth and go and join the working class. Not so powerful that way around, because who wouldn't welcome you, if you really divested yourself of your wealth and joined the marches in the street to increase the minimum wage.

We were afraid alright, and I think that those who hold this position still are, not of the people, but of uncertainty, the challenge to the theory, the need for nuance, ambiguity, complexity. We were comforted by clarity. We fetishized clean lines. We wanted purity. We imagined we had the truth by the tail.

I remember your other analogy too...reading it was like going back in time. "*Or how about this. I am really Native American. How do I know? I've always felt a special connection to animals, and started building tee pees in the backyard as soon as I was old enough. I insisted on wearing moccasins to school even though the other kids made fun of me and my parents punished me for it. I read everything I could on native people, started going to pow wows and sweat lodges as soon as I was old enough, and I knew that was the real me. And if you bio-Indians don't accept us trans-Indians, then you are just as genocidal and oppressive as the Europeans. Gender is no different. It is a class condition created by a brutal arrangement of power.*" How could such an intelligent group of young women as we were engage in such sloppy thinking? (How many of us turned into college professors? Four? Nationally recognized alternative media people? Nationally recognized activists? It's an impressive list of accomplishments!) This is not a reverse analogy, it's a mis-analogy. Maybe we thought gender was "a class condition created by a brutal arrangement of power," and only that, but we would never have made the same claim about being Native American. Why? It's blatantly reductive. It's reducing a rich set of histories, cultures, languages, religions, and practices to the effect of a brutal arrangement of power—which of course is a very important part of it. But "being Native American" is not *merely* an effect of power, in the way we thought gender was, and if we were honest about this assumption being the hidden assumption of the analogy we'd have to let go of it, as many of us did.

But maybe gender is more complicated too, and here is where I want to argue for a *critical* radical feminism, one that recognizes that gender is a sex-class system, but *not only that*. Yes we are born into gender, assigned to positions of relative power and powerlessness that deeply influence what happens next ("It's a girl!" "It's a boy!"). These relations are material through and through, meaning they are meant to determine who does what kinds of work, who has what kinds of power. Ask my students, I torture them with this. But first, even this structured power is crossed and vexed by other structures of power (most obviously race and class).

Second, we also live, we also negotiate and take up and resist and contest or affirm these structures in profoundly complex ways and sometimes deeply individual, creative and unique ways. Gender as a *lived reality* doesn't always perfectly follow the path of power that gender as a sex-class system outlines. For example, to be a "boy" who resists his gender assignation is to experience punishment, not privilege, in most contexts. I think that to be assigned a gender is to be assigned a way of having a world. I think a lot of us don't manage to feel at home in that assignation, we push back, we suffer through it, we make fun of it, we live it in resistant ways. Maybe trans folks aren't at home in *the way of having a world* that is assigned to them. Maybe it becomes unbearable. Maybe one seeks a way of living, a way of having a world that is bearable. Maybe this isn't even remotely related to penetration. Maybe this is in some ways related to the world-dysphoria and gender-dysphoria that made us feminists, though not equivalent to it. Maybe we actually have something in common here. Third, gender is a structure of the imaginary domain that reflects, but also exceeds gender as sex-class system. Maybe gender takes on a life of its own in the imaginary domain that both reflects relations of power, invests desire and affect and moral convictions with/in power and also sometimes twists free of power in certain spaces, at certain times, fleeting and illusive as these moments and spaces may be.

The point is, it isn't simple even if we want it to be. A critical radical feminism that reflects on its own limitations comes to understand this, comes to a certain place of humility about its own convictions, learns to listen to the claims of those whose very existence seems to threaten the analysis, and finds that maybe such encounters deepen the analysis after all. I think it should be troubling to you that you've been making the very same argument for 32 years. Maybe it is a sign of insularity. Maybe it's a symptom of not listening. Maybe it marks a distaste for complexity, ambiguity, nuance. And maybe those are things we need in a world threatened by environmental devastation, in which everything might depend on our capacity for solidarity with one another.

This letter doesn't say everything, but it's already too long. Welcome to Eugene, Lierre. I hope that this visit becomes, for you, for us, an invitation to a more *critical* radical feminist account of gender, one that sees trans existence not as a threat to be defended against, but as an opening to rethink the analysis and make it better, make it more responsive to the lived human realities of gender.

In solidarity,

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