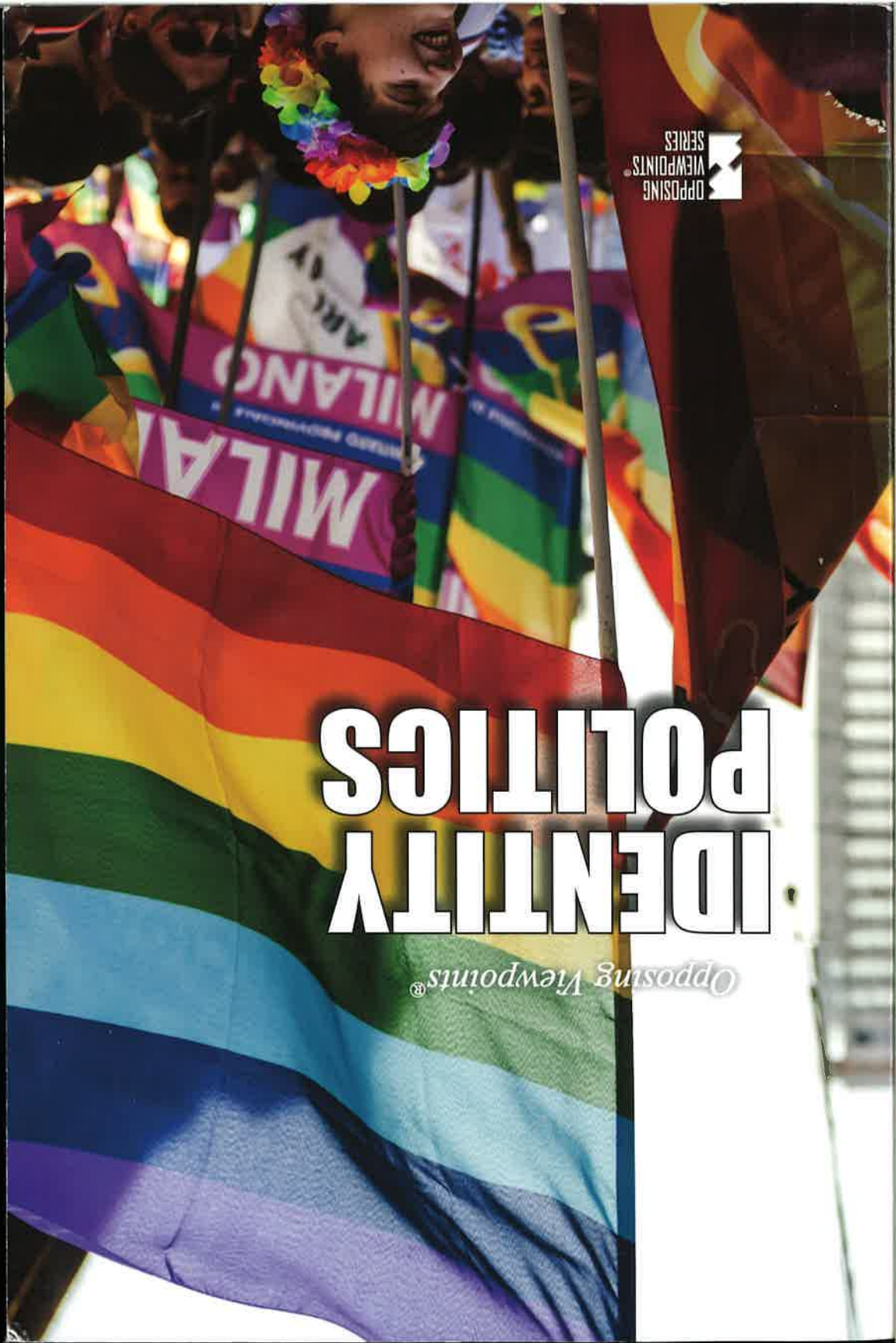


OPPOSING
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IDENTITY POLITICS

Opposing Viewpoints®



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First Edition

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Introduction

“At the crux of both sides of identity politics is a simple problem: No one wants to get left behind.”

—*“The Battle over Identity Politics, Explained,”* by
German Lopez, Vox,
December 2, 2016

While once the term “identity politics” was a bit esoteric, today it is one that many people in the United States are familiar with. This is because identity politics has once again resurged to become a point of contention and debate in many political conversations. But what is identity politics? Put very simply, identity politics refers to the belief that people who share certain commonalities (such as race, gender, or sexual orientation) can fight together for a common political goal. According to identity politics, these people can be grouped together based on their identities and can organize politically in a more effective way than through party line politics itself.

While some form of identity politics has been around for centuries, the term first surfaced in the 1960s and 1970s. This was when progressive groups organized around their common goals—and were largely successful. For example, in the civil rights movement in the United States, African Americans formed alliances based on the way they had been oppressively treated because of their race. Together, they demanded more civil rights and more equitable treatment and were successful with the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, religion, gender, or national origin. Similarly, the

women's rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s brought diverse groups of women together to fight under the banner of second-wave feminism. The women's rights movement also had many notable successes, including the passage of Title IX in 1972, which made it illegal for women to be denied any educational program or activity (particularly sports) if the program or activity was funded by the federal government. Another landmark win for women's political organizing was *Roe v. Wade*, a Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal in the United States up until the second trimester.

While identity politics has traditionally been associated with the political left, it has also been used as part of a more conservative political process. Unfortunately, identity politics in recent years has been co-opted by the ultra-right white nationalists. White nationalists believe that the United States must be preserved for white men of European descent. They have been vocal about their racist beliefs and have gained a large following. In fact, during the 2016 US presidential election, many commentators remarked that Donald Trump's successful campaign flirted with such white nationalists and preyed upon fears and racist undertones in the general population.

Just as identity politics can be used across the political spectrum, it has been the object of many criticisms from both the right and the left. Marxist commentators, for example, often opine about how identity politics focuses on race to the exclusion of class. For these Marxists, class struggle is the defining point of identity; every other form of self-identification diverts from the true roots of poverty and oppression. For others, identity politics is exclusionary and even laughable. Yet others denounce identity politics for reinforcing differences, or making the boundaries between groups of people more concrete and, thus, less bridgeable. For many critics of identity politics—and even for proponents of identity politics who feel it has been misused—it can be dangerous to believe that our identities are fixed and that we cannot share political affinities even if we don't share identities. According to

them, doing this allows us to be divided into “us” and “them”—and that’s no way to make a more just and equitable world for all.

The viewpoints in *Identity Politics* (Opposing Viewpoints) examine the complexities of this hot topic, including criticism leveraged on both sides of the political spectrum and the ways in which the right and left have used identity politics to their advantage. Authors present diverse perspectives in chapters titled “How Has Identity Politics Historically Shaped Policy and Law?,” “How Has Identity Politics Incorporated or Ignored Intersectionality?,” “How Has Identity Politics Ignored Other Useful Ways of Political Organizing?,” and “How Can Identity Politics Become a More Useful Political Organizing Tool in the Future?” These viewpoints will encourage you to think more deeply not only about your own identity and its place in the political arena, but also about the role of identity in politics more generally.

How Has Identity
Politics Historically
Shaped Policy
and Law?

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CHAPTER
I

Chapter Preface

The viewpoints in this chapter examine identity politics through a lens of political and social history. The first viewpoint in this chapter, written by Matthew Yglesias, argues that identity politics is a necessity. In fact, all politics can boil down to identity politics.

However, this standpoint is refuted by the historical examination of the topic by Joan D. Mandle. For Mandle, a professor of sociology and women's studies, identity politics emerges from a particular moment in the women's liberation movement and the civil rights movement. While it may have led to successful political organizing, it has become transformed into a zero-sum game that positions groups of people against one another and solidifies oppressive structures.

Following Mandle's critique of identity politics are discussions of the resurgence of white nationalism, which has recently been rebranded as the "alt-right" movement. White nationalist leaders David Duke and others, such as alt-right movement founder Richard Spencer, have used identity politics to advance a racist ideology that appeals to groups of disaffected and disadvantaged young men like Nathan Benjamin Damigo, an Iraqi War veteran, former Marine, and avowed "identitarian." For identitarians, political organization revolves around race and ethnicity. Identitarians like Damigo feel that they have suffered from the rise of multiculturalism and that they must fight to ensure a place in the world for white men of European descent.

Thus, while identity politics is responsible for many victories in regard to civil liberties, it also has a dark underbelly whereby some groups can actively and unapologetically work for racist principles.

VIEWPOINT

"The implication ... is that somehow an identity is something only women or African-Americans or perhaps LGBT people have."

All Politics Is Identity Politics

Matthew Yglesias

In the following viewpoint, Matthew Yglesias argues that all politics is essentially identity politics—except that some people are blind to this fact because of their privilege. According to Yglesias, politics itself is defined as making "collective decisions" for the better good. This necessitates that individual identities are involved in the decision-making process. Unfortunately, certain identities are more associated with identity politics than others, making it seem, to some, like "gendered or ethnic claims" against "pure selves and neutral rationality." The truth is much more nuanced than this, according to Yglesias, and everyone, no matter their race, ethnicity, or gender, involves their identity in their politics. Yglesias is a journalist who writes about politics for Vox.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. Why might the popularity of identity politics be a “useful shock” to the media?
2. According to the author, which identities are emphasized in identity politics? Why?
3. Why is identity inextricably tied to politics, according to the viewpoint?

Something that I thought I noticed soon after I graduated college and moved to DC was that a lot of my female friends were *very* interested in the subject of street harassment. Later, thanks to the magic of social media and web traffic I learned that I’d misconstrued this entirely. It’s not that *women I was friends with* were very interested in this subject. *Women in general* were interested. Their interest wasn’t exactly invisible to me—I was hearing about it in person from friends—but ten or 12 years ago those friends’ interest wasn’t refracted back and validated by the larger media ecosystem the way it is today. It seemed like an idiosyncratic obsession rather than what it is: an alarmingly widespread social malady that a male-dominated media culture had kind of swept under the rug.

Another thing you see in the web traffic stats is that the American public’s appetite for internecine warfare between diaspora Jewish intellectuals about what is and is not the appropriate attitude to have toward Israel is quite limited.

When you stop and think about it, this is perfectly obvious (indeed, if you’re not Jewish it probably didn’t even require thought). But in a world where the New York Times’ columnist rotation features more Jews than women of any ethnic background, it’s easy for a person (like me!) with demographic attributes very typical of the prestige media to be blind to the ways particularist identities were shaping coverage decisions.

This is, I think, the problem with [the] idea of “identity politics” as a shorthand for talking about feminism or anti-racism.

The world of navel-gazing journalism is currently enmeshed in a couple of partially overlapping conversations, about "PC culture," diversity, social justice, technological change, and shifting business models. One thread of this is the (accurate) observation that social media distribution creates new incentives for publications to be attuned to feminist and minority rights perspectives in a way that was not necessarily the case in the past. But where some see a cynical play for readership, I see an extraordinarily useful shock to a media ecosystem that's too long been myopic in its range of concerns.

The implication of this usage (which is widespread, and by no means limited to people who agree with Chait) is that somehow an identity is something only women or African-Americans or perhaps LGBT people have. White men just have ideas about politics that spring from a realm of pure reason, with concerns that are by definition universal.

You see something similar in Noam Scheiber's argument that New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio went astray by emphasizing an "identity group agenda" of police reform at the expense of a (presumably identity-free) agenda of populist economics. For starters, it is actually inevitable that a New York City mayor would end up spending more time on his police department management agenda (something that is actually under the mayor's control) than on tax policy, which is set by the State Legislature in Albany. But beyond that, not addressing a racially discriminatory status quo in policing is itself a choice. Indeed, it's a kind of identity group appeal—to white people, whose preferred means of striking the balance between liberty and security, in many contexts, is that security should be achieved by depriving *other people* of their civil liberties.

This is where the at-times tiresome concept of privilege becomes very useful. The truth is that almost all politics is, on some level, about identity. But those with the right identities have the privilege of simply calling it politics while labeling other peoples' agendas "identity."

Denial of this reality, it seems to me, is actually a key failing of a certain brand of American liberalism. Conservatives may join some white male liberals in decrying “identity politics,” but nobody knows better than conservatives the power and importance of identities like Christian, American, traditional family, etc., in shaping thinking and giving meaning to political engagement.

Indeed, we just saw a species of this failure of American liberalism in the Obama administration’s swiftly abandoned plan to kill tax-subsidized 529 accounts. The entire politics of this ended up hinging not on economic models, but on the question of whether a certain class of professional couple earning a low-six figure income should be considered “middle class.” Or look at how Obama’s effort to raise middle-class incomes in a way that encourages work morphed into a “war on homemakers.”

All politics is, on some level, identity politics. The idea that it’s some special attribute of black politics or feminist politics is just blindness. And while identity politics can be practiced in bad ways or in pursuit of bad goals, that’s simply to say that *politics* can be practiced both for good and for ill. The idea that gendered or ethnic claims are despoiling a liberalism of pure selves and neutral rationality is little more than an unselfconscious form of identity politics. Politics is about collective decisions. This necessarily implicates individuals’ identities by defining who is inside and who is outside the community of concern and under what terms.

The trend by which modern digital media forces publications to be more aware of what resonates with audiences is not an unalloyed good. But given the centrality of identity to politics of all kinds and the badly skewed demographics at the commanding heights of the American media ecosystem, *this particular aspect* of the trend is pretty clearly change for the better.

"Demonstrating the pleasures and benefits of co-operative, compassionate organisation offers a strong threat to the world of borders and guards."

Compassion Is More Useful Than Identity Politics

Jamie Heckert

In the following viewpoint, Jamie Heckert leverages a critique of identity politics from the progressive left. He states that identity politics misses the mark because it solidifies divides among people and, thus, stifles compassion. Simple acts of compassion, Heckert suggests, may be more useful to overturning social hierarchy and oppression than political organizing done through identity politics. Heckert uses a quote by the feminist academic Audre Lorde—"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"—to show how tools of division and hierarchical societies, like identity politics, will never dismantle the systems they attempt to critique. Heckert earned a PhD from the University of Edinburgh and is a founding member of Anarchist Studies Network and coeditor of *Anarchism & Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power*.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. How does the author distinguish identity from the beginning of the viewpoint?
2. What is one of the many reasons the author gives for why identity politics fails?
3. Why does the author say that radical politics are not appealing?

Identify is the process of creating and maintaining borders, creating different *kinds of people*. This keeps the world packaged in tidy little boxes. These boxes, in turn, are necessary for the violence and domination of hierarchical societies. There cannot be masters or slaves, bosses or workers, men or women, whites or blacks, leaders or followers, heterosexuals or queers, without identity.

Social movement¹, both past and present, often attempts to use identity as a tool of liberation. Movement based on gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnic and ability identities all have some success in challenging hierarchy and oppression. By no means do I mean to diminish the impact of past and present activism. Personally, my life would have been much more difficult before feminist and gay liberation/equality movement arose. I argue that identity politics is inherently limited in its ability to challenge hierarchy because it depends upon the same roots as the system it aims to overthrow. "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."²

Does that Mean We Should all Be the Same?

Identity is also the answer to the question, "who am I?". This is different from answering, "what *kind* of person am I?". Labels like "woman", "white" and "heterosexual" tell us about someone's position in various hierarchies. These positions, these identities, are significant to how a person thinks of themselves. But, they don't answer the question, "who am I?" Each of us is unique, both

similar and different to everyone else in various ways. Working to eliminate identity in the hierarchical sense (e.g. some animals are more equal than others) isn't the same as eliminating identity in the individual sense (e.g. I'll still be Jamie). When I talk about the problems with identity, I mean the "boxes" rather than individuals. Let me use "sexual orientation" as an example. Supposedly people can be put into three boxes, depending on whether they fancy women, men or both. While this is a popular idea, it seems to cause an awful lot of suffering. People worry a lot about their image, and try very hard to make sure that others realise "what" they are. We also worry about "what" other people are — are they like me or are they different? Some people are so unhappy and anxious about these things that they attack others, either physically or verbally. Even people who think of themselves as heterosexual can be attacked. Finally, people suffer when they desire others of the "wrong" gender, or if they worry that others think they do. One alternative is that we all try to be "equal opportunity lovers" and fancy everyone. Those who succeed could then feel superior to those whose desires are less politically correct. Another alternative is that we try to give up thinking of people (including ourselves) in terms of sexual orientation and instead recognise that everyone's sexual desires are complex and unique. This would mean being yourself rather than a heterosexual, a queer or whatever, and to recognise people as people instead of members of categories. We could never all be the same, even if we tried!

What is Wrong with Political Identity?

Identity separates people. It encourages us to believe that "we" are different from "others." Identity can also encourage conformity. How else do I show that I am *one of us* other than conforming to the accepted codes prescribed to that identity? This construction of similarity and difference exists whether we are talking about traditional identity politics groups like "disabled people" or political identities like "environmentalists." This separation of us from them has serious consequences for political movement.

Identity encourages isolation. Political ghettos cannot exist without political identity; and their existence reinforces it. Not only are the “activists” separated from the “non-activists,” but within a broad political ghetto, *anarchists*, *feminists*, and *environmentalists* (amongst others) often see themselves as involved in separate struggles. People who consider themselves politically active are separated both from each other and from others who do not share an “activist” identity. Effective movement for radical social change cannot be based on such divisions.

Identity reduces social phenomena to individuals. Concepts like anarchism and racism are social. They are not embodied by individuals as terms like “anarchist” and “racist” suggest. Rather, they exist as ideas, practices and relationships. In most societies, racism is inherent in our institutionalised relationships and ways of thinking. We can and should be critical of racism, but to attack people as “racists” can only further alienate them from our efforts.³ Besides, it is a dangerous fantasy to believe that “racists” can be separated from those of us who are non-racist. Likewise, anarchism exists throughout every society. Every time people co-operate without coercion to achieve shared goals, that is anarchy. Every time someone thinks that people should be able to get along with each other without domination, that is anarchism. If we only see racism in “racists,” we will never effectively challenge racism. If we only see anarchism in “anarchists,” we will miss out on so many desperately needed sources of inspiration.

Identity encourages purity. If we believe that concepts like feminism can be embodied in individuals, then some people can be more feminist than others. This leads to debates about “real feminists” and how feminists should act (e.g. debates regarding feminism and heterosexuality). Feminist purity allows for hierarchy (e.g. more or less and thus better or worse feminists) and encourages guilt (e.g. asking yourself “should real feminists think/act like this?”).

Political identity simplifies personal identity. A related problem for feminist identity, for example, is that it demands we focus

on one aspects of our complex lives. Feminist movement has often been dominated by white middle-class women who have a particular perspective on what is a "women's issue." Many women have had to choose between involvement in a woman's movement that fails to recognise ethnicity and class issues, or in black or working class politics that did not acknowledge gender. But, the alternative of specialised identity politics could get very silly (e.g. a group for disabled, transgender, lesbian, working-class women of colour). Likewise, if I describe myself as a feminist, an anarchist, and a sex radical, I am suddenly three different people. However, if I say I advocate feminism, anarchism and radical sexual politics if I am one person with a variety of beliefs.⁴

Identity often imagines easily defined interests. Feminism is often presented as for women only; men are perceived to entirely benefit from the gender system. Many men do clearly benefit from the gender system in terms of institutionalised domination. If we perceive interests as inherently stemming from current systems, we fail to recognise how people would benefit from alternative systems. If we want to encourage and inspire people to create a very different form of society, we should share with each other what we see as beneficial. We must recognise that different value systems (e.g. domination versus compassion) result in very different interests.

Identity discourages participation. If people are worried that they might be excluded through labelling (e.g. racist or homophobic), they won't feel welcomed and won't get involved. Likewise, people do not get involved if they believe that it is not in their interests. If we perpetuate the idea that feminism is for women, men will never see how it could also be in their interests to support feminism. Or they might support feminism, but feel guilty for their male privilege. Either way, men are not encouraged to be active in feminist movements. Radical social change requires mass social movement. Identity politics, by definition, can never achieve this. Political identities, like "environmentalist", can likewise become a basis for minority politics.

Identity creates opposition. By dividing the world up into opposing pairs (e.g. men/women, heterosexuals/queers, ruling class/working-class, whites/blacks), identity creates opposite types of people who perceive themselves as having opposing interests. This opposition means that people fail to recognise their common interests as human beings. The opposition of two forces pushing against each other means that very little changes.

Identity freezes the fluid. Neither individual identity (the “who am I?” kind) nor social organisation are fixed, but are in constant motion. Political identities require that these fluid processes are frozen realities with particular characteristics and inherent interests. In failing to recognise the nature of both identity and society, political identity can only inhibit radical social change.

It May not Be Perfect, but Can't it Still Be a Useful Strategy?

It is a very good strategy if you don't want to change things very much. Identity politics fits in nicely within the dominant neo-liberal ideology. Groups created around oppressed identities can lobby the state for civil rights. This idea of trying to protect individuals without changing relationships or systems of organisation is compatible with the individualistic basis of capitalism and representative “democracy.”

I would never argue that a strategy has to be “perfect” to be useful, but it must be consistent with its aims. Ends and means can only be separated in our minds. If the aim is to reduce or eliminate hierarchical social divisions (e.g. gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, class), a strategy which depends upon those very divisions can never be successful.

If Political Identity Is Such a Poor Strategy, Why Is it So Common?

On a personal level, political identity makes us feel part of something larger at the same time that it makes us feel special were different. In the short-term, this can be very successful defence

mechanism. For example, I'm sure I would have been a lot more damaged by the sexist and homophobic environment in which I grew up if I had not been able to convert stigma into pride. However, feeling yourself to be different and separate from other people is not a successful long-term strategy, either psychologically or politically.

What's the Alternative to Political Identity?

If borders are the problem, then we must support and encourage each other to tear down the fences. Two crucial tools for dismantling borders are systematic analyses and compassionate strategies.

We should recognise oppression is not simply a practice of individuals who have power over those who do not. Instead, we could see how forms of organisation (including institutions and relationships) *systematically* produce hierarchies and borders. People will only see an interest in getting more involved if they realise that their individual problems—*anxiety, depression, exhaustion, anger, poverty, meaningless work, unsatisfying sex lives, etc*—are not unique, but are systematically produced. Furthermore, their action will only be effective if they work to reduce all forms of hierarchy and domination. Constructs including gender, sexuality, capitalism, race and the nation state are interdependent systems. Each system of domination serves to reinforce the others. This doesn't mean we have to solve every problem instantly, but we must recognise that all issues are human issues. At the same time, we must not imagine that a particular system of domination (not even capitalism!) is the source of all others.

Radical politics is rarely appealing because it focuses on the evils of the world. This offers little that is hopeful or constructive in people's daily lives. If we want to see widespread social movement for radical change, we have to offer people something *they* value. Listening to people's concerns, caring about their problems and encouraging and supporting them to develop systemic solutions requires compassion. Offer people a better quality of life instead of focusing so much on depressing aspects of our current society.

We should also recognise that people positioned in more privileged categories may in some ways suffer. At the very least, people who feel a strong need to dominate and control must suffer deep insecurities, the results of competition and hierarchy. Insecurity, domination and control are not conducive to fulfilling and meaningful relationships with other people. Attacking people in “privileged” positions does little to dismantle these systems. It also gives entirely too much credit to people in those positions—they are both products and producers of systems, just like the rest of us.

To radically reorganise our society, we should aim to both diminish systematic domination and suffering and encourage systematic compassion. Just as apparently disconnected and often incoherent forms of domination can reinforce and maintaining each other, so too can a compassionate organisation of society become systematic and self-sustaining.

Encouraging people to be more comfortable with sexuality in general has been a key focus of my own political efforts. But, sexuality is only one area in which a compassionate and systematic approach has much more radical potential than politicising identity.

Find sources of suffering, whatever they are, and support and encourage people to find ways of relating to themselves and others that reduce that suffering. Help build compassionate, co-operative institutions (e.g. social centres, support/discussion groups, mediation services, childcare support, food not bombs). Tell people when you admire or appreciate their efforts. Support people trying to change their environments (e.g. workplace resistance). Offer alternatives to people who are involved in or considering authoritarian positions (e.g. military, police, business management).

Demonstrating the pleasures and benefits of co-operative, compassionate organisation offers a strong threat to the world of borders and guards. I suspect that fragmented groups, anti-whatever demonstrations, unfriendly, exclusive meetings and utopian “after the revolution” lectures will never be quite as enticing to people outside the activist ghetto.

Notes

1. Following bell hooks, I refer to social movement, rather than maintaining that boundaries can be placed around identifiable "social movements."
2. See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," pp110-112 in *Sister Out-siders: Essays and Speeches* (1984), who took the title from an old US civil rights adage.
3. See Border Camps: "The New 'Sexy' Thing?" in this issue.
4. See pretty much anything by bell hooks for more on this.

"I have found feminism to be an indispensable foundation for me to make sense of my experiences and to articulate the obstacles and issues that I face."

Identity Politics Is a Good Thing That Can Be Destructive When Used to Exclude

Julia Serano

In the following viewpoint, Julia Serano argues that there are three "sides" of feminism, the emergence of which has led to tension within the movement because of differing identities. She uses the example of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) to show how certain identities have been traditionally left out of feminism. In this case, organizers of this women-only event excluded trans women from participation, leading to rifts within the feminist movement at large and bringing up questions of identity, sexism, and privilege. Serano suggests that identity politics can be dangerous when it is used to exclude others who share similar political and social concerns. Serano is a writer, trans activist, and author of *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements (Seal Press, 2013) and Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity (Seal Press, 2007).*

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What are the three “sides” to the debate that Serano sets out?
2. Why have some lesbian-feminists suggested that trans women should not be included in their movement?
3. How might our understanding of identity politics shift based on Serano’s definition of an inclusive feminism?

In 1991, Nancy Jean Burkholder was expelled from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF), the world’s largest annual women-only event, because festival workers suspected that she was a trans woman—that is, someone who was assigned a male sex at birth but who identifies and lives as female. That incident sparked protests from a burgeoning transgender movement to challenge what eventually came to be known as the festival’s “womyn-born-womyn”-only policy, which effectively bars trans women from attending. The protests evolved into Camp Trans, which continues to take place just down the road from MWMF each year, and which has become a focal point for a much broader push for trans-inclusion within feminist and queer communities. Despite more than 15 years of petitioning, and a growing acceptance of trans identities in both mainstream society and within queer, feminist and other progressive circles, the festival still officially maintains its “womyn-born-womyn”-only policy, and countless other lesbian- and queer-woman-focused groups and events continue to harbor dismissive, if not outright disdainful, attitudes toward trans women. The history of the MWMF trans woman-exclusion debate has been retold countless times—often in an overly simplistic, cut-and-dry manner. The controversy is usually depicted in one of two ways: either pitting the supposedly out-of-touch, transphobic lesbian-separatists who run the festival against a more politically progressive transgender minority, or portraying transgender activists as bullies who selfishly seek to undermine one of the few remaining vestiges of women-only space with their

supposedly masculine bodies and energies. In addition to being obvious caricatures, these sorts of us-versus-them portrayals obscure one of the most important aspects of the story: the fact that there are actually three "sides" to this debate, each driven by a different take on feminism.

Rather than rehash the history or delve into all of the details about the festival and the controversy, I will attempt to describe these three differing feminist perspectives and discuss how they have played out with regard to the issue of trans woman-exclusion at WMF, as well as in lesbian/queer women's communities more generally.

For those unfamiliar with the subject, I will start by defining some of the trans-specific language that I will be using. Transsexuals are individuals who identify and live as members of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth. A trans woman is someone who has socially, physically and/or legally transitioned from male to female, and a trans man is someone who has similarly transitioned from female to male. While the medical establishment (and the mainstream media) typically define "transsexual" in terms of the medical procedures that an individual might undergo (for example, hormones and surgeries), many trans people find such definitions to be objectifying (as they place undue focus on body parts rather than the person as a whole) and classist (as not all trans people can afford to physically transition). For these reasons, trans activists favor definitions based on self-identity, that is, whether one identifies and lives as a woman or man. "Transgender" is an umbrella term for all people who defy other people's expectations and assumptions regarding gender, and can be used to refer to transsexuals as well as people who are gender nonconforming in other ways—for example, cross-dressers, drag performers, feminine men, masculine women, and genderqueers (who do not identify exclusively as either women or men), to name a few. Transgender people who defy gender norms in the male-to-female/feminine direction are said to be on the trans-feminine spectrum; those who transgress gender norms in the female-to-male/masculine direction make up the trans masculine spectrum.

Unilateral Sexism and Lesbian-Feminism

MWMF is one of many women-only institutions that grew out of the lesbian-feminist movement during the 1970s and 1980s. A dominant ideology within that movement was the belief that sexism constitutes a unilateral form of oppression—that is, men are the oppressors, and women the oppressed, end of story. While more liberal or reform-minded feminists of that time period focused primarily on the most obvious examples of sexism (e.g., wage and workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, reproductive rights, etc.), lesbian- (and other **radical**) feminists extended their critiques of **sexism** to include **many** taken-for-granted aspects of gender and sexuality. They argued, for example, that masculinity is inherently dominating and oppressive and that femininity is necessarily associated with objectification and subjugation, and that both forms of gender expression are merely products of socialization rather than natural aspects of people. According to this perspective, a first step toward overturning sexism is for individuals to distance themselves from ways of being that are associated with male domination and female subjugation and instead revert to more natural (and presumably androgynous) forms of gender and sexual expression.

Lesbian-feminist critiques did not solely take aim at the heterosexual mainstream; they also targeted other sexual minorities whose gender and sexual practices were deemed (in their view) to emulate unilateral sexism. This includes those who engage in BDSM (who were seen as reinforcing dominant/submissive sexual roles), and butch and femme lesbians, drag performers, cross-dressers, and transsexuals (who were all seen as reinforcing masculine/feminine **gender roles**). While lesbian-feminists **derided** many forms of **what we would now call transgender expression**, the bulk of their contempt was directed squarely at trans women and others on the trans feminine spectrum. This attitude stemmed both from the assumption that trans women are “really men” (i.e., oppressors) and that femininity is tantamount to a “slave status.” Thus, according to this logic, trans female and trans feminine individuals were viewed

as oppressors who appropriate the dress and identities of the very people they oppress. For example, feminist Robin Morgan claimed that trans women "parody female oppression and suffering," and Mary Daly equated trans feminine expression with "whites playing 'blackface.'" Many (including Morgan and, most famously, Janice Raymond) even described trans womanhood as a form of rape. While many lesbian-feminists today will concede that such accusations are beyond the pale, their unilateral perspective on sexism still leads them to insist that trans women should not be allowed to enter women-only spaces such as MWMF based on the assumption that trans women have experienced male socialization and privilege in the past, and/or because their bodies, personalities and energies still supposedly remain "male" or "masculine" on some level.

The Gender Binary, Queer Theory and Transgender Activism

Prior to the mid-1990s, trans women and allies typically responded to trans woman-exclusion by stressing the similarities between trans women (who live as women and thus experience misogyny in their day-to-day lives) and non-trans women. But this strategy of emphasizing similarities became less relevant by the mid-to-late 1990s due to the rise of "third wave" feminisms, which challenged universalizing views of womanhood and examined the many differences that exist between women. For example, "third wave" feminists embraced the critiques made by women of color over the years that the belief that sexism was the "primary" oppression, or even a unilateral form of oppression, ignores the ways in which sexism intersects with racism and classism in many women's lives. Additionally, many feminists (especially younger ones) around this time began reclaiming expressions of femininity and sexuality that had previously been considered taboo or repressive among lesbian-feminists. But perhaps no shift in feminism had such a profound affect on transgender-inclusion within lesbian and queer women's communities as the rise of queer theory.

Queer theory shares the lesbian-feminist belief that many aspects of gender and sexuality are culturally derived (rather than natural), but takes this notion one step further by bringing into question the very categories upon which sexism is based. This is often accomplished by critiquing, subverting and deconstructing the “gender binary”—that is, the assumption that there are only two legitimate genders: feminine women and masculine men. For this reason, many queer theorists became particularly interested in transgender people, whom they sometimes hailed for challenging traditional notions about femaleness and maleness. This view is in sharp contrast to lesbian-feminist perspectives, which claimed that these same individuals reinforced oppressive sex roles.

Queer theory both influenced, and was influenced by, the rise of transgender activism—a movement to unite previously disparate gender-variant communities around the idea that these groups are all targeted for discrimination because they transgress binary gender norms. Activists such as Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, Riki Wilchins and countless others mobilized many transgender spectrum folks, and won over many feminist and queer allies, by positioning the transgender community as the cutting edge of a much broader movement to shatter the gender binary. In 1999, Wilchins and other transgender activists took this approach to MWMF, where they revived Camp Trans (after a five-year hiatus) and challenged the “womyn-born-womyn”-only policy on the basis that it is rooted in outdated, binary assumptions about gender.

The idea that transgender identities and expression subvert the gender binary did much to increase transgender-inclusion within feminist and queer spaces. However, this approach did not benefit all transgender people equally. Because transgender-inclusion was explicitly linked to gender transgression and subverting the gender binary, those individuals who did not identify within the gender binary—for example, people who are genderqueer, gender-fluid, or who engage in “genderfuck” (purposefully playing or screwing with gender expression and presentation)—tended to be most celebrated, whereas transsexuals—especially those who

identity within the binary and who appear gender-normative and/or heterosexual post-transition—frequently still had their motives and identities questioned.

It is also common for trans feminine spectrum individuals to be called out for “reinforcing the gender binary” more so than their counterparts on the trans masculine spectrum. This is due, in part, to the fact that female and feminine appearances are more readily and routinely judged in our society than male and masculine ones. And because concepts like “transgression” and “rebellion” tend to be coded as “masculine” in our culture, whereas “conformity” and “conventionality” are typically coded as “feminine,” there is an unspoken bias that leads masculine transgender expression to be seen as more inherently transgressive than feminine transgender expression. Indeed, such unconscious presumptions about masculinity and femininity have surely contributed to the tendency exhibited by many feminists to praise women who engage in traditionally “masculine” endeavors, while expressing anywhere from apathy to antagonism toward men who engage in traditionally “feminine” endeavors. In fact, one could make the case that historically feminism has been predisposed toward “trans-masculinism”—that is, favoring gender transgression in the masculine direction.

Not coincidentally, perhaps the biggest change in lesbian and queer women’s communities since the rise of queer theory and transgender activism has been a growing influx of trans men and others on the trans masculine spectrum, many of whom date and/or are partnered to non-trans queer women. While trans men are not officially allowed in MWMF, many still attend anyway (as the festival has essentially had a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy regarding gender identity for much of the last decade). The significant attendance of trans male/masculine folks led one trans masculine attendee in 2000 to remark that the festival was “the largest female-to-male trans conference I have ever seen in my life.” The festival not only accommodates such individuals, but has invited trans masculine musical artists who go by the pronoun “he”

to perform on the festival stage. It has also become increasingly common for MWMF supporters to claim that the festival is a place for those who have grown up female in a patriarchal society, an interpretation that conveniently enables trans men to attend but not trans women. Indeed, this growing inclusion of trans men has not yielded a similar inclusion of trans women; in fact, many feel that it has only served to make trans women more invisible and irrelevant within queer women's communities.

Trans-Misogyny, Intersectionality and "Second Wave" Transgender Activism

I personally became involved in the MWMF trans woman-exclusion issue in 2003 when I attended Camp Trans. This was a turning-point year for the protest, as organizers began to make a purposeful effort to focus specifically on working toward trans woman-inclusion (rather than "transgender-inclusion" more generally) and to try to shift the dynamics of the protest from one that favored trans men and others on the trans masculine spectrum to one that is equally welcoming of, and empowering for, trans women. It was there that I first had in-depth conversations with other trans women about how people on the trans feminine spectrum tend to be more routinely derided and demonized—both in mainstream society and within lesbian and queer women's spaces like MWMF—than our trans masculine counterparts. It was clear to many of us that this phenomenon was not simply the result of the fact that we "transgress gender norms" (something both trans masculine and trans feminine folks do). Rather, it seemed to be driven more by traditional sexism—that is, the presumption that femaleness and femininity are inferior to, or less legitimate than, maleness and masculinity.

Over the last five years, trans feminine feminists have begun to articulate a new perspective on feminism and trans activism that better captures our own experiences dealing with sexism. This approach is not so much rooted in queer theory as it is in intersectionality—a theory that grew out of the work of feminists

of color, most thoroughly chronicled by Patricia Hill Collins, and perhaps first discussed in relation to the MWMF trans woman-exclusion issue by Emi Koyama. Intersectionality states that different forms of oppression do not act independently of one another, but rather they interact synergistically. Unlike queer theory and lesbian-feminism, intersectionality focuses primarily on the ways in which people are institutionally marginalized, rather than fixating on whether any given individual's identity or behaviors "reinforce" or "subvert" the gender system.

According to this view, trans women lie at the intersection of (at least) two types of sexism. The first is cissexism, which is the societal-wide tendency to view transsexual gender identities and sex embodiments as being less legitimate than those of cissexuals—that is, nontranssexuals. (Note: the word "cisgender" is similarly used as a synonym for nontransgender.) Cissexism functions in a manner analogous to heterosexism: Transsexual gender identities and homosexual/bisexual orientations are both typically viewed as being inherently questionable, unnatural, morally suspect, and less socially and legally valid than their cissexual and heterosexual counterparts. Not only does cissexism institutionally marginalize transsexual individuals, but it privileges cissexuals, rendering their genders and sexed bodies as unquestionable, unmarked and taken for granted (similar to how heterosexual attraction and relationships are privileged in our culture).

While all transsexuals face cissexism, trans women experience this form of sexism as being especially exacerbated by traditional sexism. For example, trans women are routinely hyper-sexualized in our society, especially in the media, where we are regularly depicted as fetishists, sexual deceivers, sex workers and/or in a sexually provocative fashion (trans men, in contrast, are not typically depicted in this way). The common presumption that trans women transition to female for sexual reasons seems to be based on the premise that women as a whole have no worth beyond their ability to be sexualized. Furthermore, most of the societal consternation, ridicule and violence directed at trans people focuses

on individuals on the trans feminine spectrum—often specifically targeting our desire to be female or our feminine presentation. While trans men experience cissexism, their desire to be male/masculine is typically not mocked or derided in the same way—to do so would bring maleness/masculinity itself into question. Thus, those of us on the trans feminine spectrum don't merely experience cissexism or "transphobia" so much as we experience trans-misogyny.

Trans feminine perspectives on sexism have shaken up the dynamics of long-standing feminist debates about trans individuals and inclusion. For example, lesbian-feminist critiques of queer theory and transgender activism have charged that focusing primarily on transgressing or blurring the distinction between "woman" and "man" does nothing to address the affect that traditional sexism has on women's lives. Trans feminine feminists typically agree with this lesbian-feminist critique and further extend it to address the many ways in which traditional sexism impacts our own lives, both as women and as trans women.

Trans feminine feminists have also taken issue with the ways in which others have defined and positioned us in the MWMF inclusion debate. For example, queer theorists and transgender activists often argue for inclusion on the basis that transgender people transgress or subvert the gender binary. Trans women have challenged this approach for being both masculine-centric (as it favors trans masculine individuals) and cissexist (as the presumption that we blur or subvert the gender binary is the direct result of people viewing us as "fake" and "illegitimate" women in the first place). Lesbian-feminists, on the other hand, typically argue that trans women should be denied entrance into women-only spaces such as MWMF because we were born and socialized male. These claims are also masculine-centric (as they emphasize supposedly "male/masculine" aspects of our history over our female identities and lived experiences as women) and cissexist (as they presume that our female identities are less legitimate than those of cissexual women).

Trans feminine feminists have also countered the way in which MWMF has increasingly co-opted queer/transgender rhetoric in recent years in its defense of its trans woman-exclusion policy. For example, a 2006 MWMF press release described "womyn-born-womyn" as "a valid and honorable gender identity." This statement seems to take advantage of the transgender activist claim that there are countless possible gender identities, each of which should be equally respected. However, it fails to recognize who the privileged majority is in this case (cissexual women/"womyn-born-womyn") and who the marginalized minority is (transsexual women). Thus, MWMF's statement is analogous to the hypothetical situation of heterosexual women declaring that "straight woman" is a valid gender identity in order to justify excluding lesbian and bisexual women from an event in which all other women are welcome. Most MWMF supporters would undoubtedly recognize such an approach as being unquestionably heterosexist; by the same reasoning, MWMF's trans woman-exclusion policy is unquestionably cissexist. MWMF has also asserted that the festival is not "transphobic" because plenty of transgender people attend, or because it is "home to womyn who could be considered gender outlaws" (an apparent reference to Kate Bornstein's binary-shattering book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*). While this strategy gives the appearance of accommodating queer/transgender perspectives, it does not address the concerns of trans feminine feminists, who believe that the festival's policy is primarily cissexist and trans-misogynistic/trans-masculinist (as it is excludes trans women while accommodating trans male/masculine folks).

A recognition of trans-misogyny/trans-masculinism—both within queer and feminist settings, and in society at large—has led many trans women and trans male allies to critique the growing numbers of trans men who, despite their physical transitions and the fact that they now live as men, still feel entitled to inhabit lesbian and women's spaces. Such individuals will often justify their continued presence in such spaces by citing their female

history, or claiming that they don't feel 100 percent like a "man" (even though their appearance definitely reads "man"). Such claims reinforce the popular misconception that transsexual gender identities should not be taken seriously, and thus has had a direct negative impact on trans women's inclusion in these same spaces. In a sense, these trans men seem to want to have it both ways: being men in the male-centered mainstream and then being "not-men" in queer/women's/feminist spaces. This places trans women in no-win situation: We are treated as second-class citizens in the male-centered mainstream because we are women, and then further derided for supposedly being privileged, infiltrating "men" in queer/feminist/women's spaces.

This growing "gender gap" between trans masculine and trans feminine communities is not unique to the MWMF trans woman-exclusion debate, but can be seen in other areas of transgender activism. While trans men used to be a minority in the trans community, over the last 15 years their numbers have significantly increased and, in many cities and college campuses, they have come to dominate transgender organizations and activism. This prominence is often enabled by the trans-masculinist leanings of feminist and queer activism (which tend to be suspicious of, or less welcoming toward, trans women both before and after our transitions). Trans men also enjoy significant social advantages over trans women, both because they physically tend to "pass" as cissexuals more often and more easily than trans women, and because of the male privilege they experience post-transition. Trans women—especially those who transition at a young age and who thus do not benefit significantly from male privilege pre-transition—have more difficulties finding and maintaining employment, are more susceptible to poverty, and are more likely to engage in survival sex work to make ends meet. There is a growing sense among many trans women that previous models of transgender activism have largely ignored these trans female/feminine-specific issues in a manner similar to how progressive movements during the 1960s largely ignored woman-specific

issues, and how the gay rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s largely ignored lesbian-specific issues.

Trans feminine feminists are not the only group critiquing the "first wave" of transgender activism for ignoring the ways in which transgender issues are often intertwined with, and exacerbated by, other forms of oppression. Since the early 2000s, a number of organizations—such as the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, TransJustice, Trans/Gender Variant in Prison and others—have begun to focus specifically on the needs of trans people of color, trans people of low income, and those who are incarcerated—all of whom are especially vulnerable to gender regulation and oppression due to living at the intersection of racism, classism and sexism. As a testament to the importance of intersectionality, a GenderPAC report on violence against gender non-conforming youth showed that the vast majority of the victims were of color, poor or on the trans feminine spectrum (and very often, all three). Activists like Viviane Namaste and Mirha-Soleil Ross have pointed out that trans sex workers—typically poor trans women and trans feminine spectrum individuals—receive little to no attention or support from mainstream transgender organizations, activists and academics, despite the fact that they are arguably the most marginalized segment of the transgender community. Other activists, such as Monica Roberts—who blogs under the name TransGriot and who is one of the organizers of the annual Transistahs and Transbrothas Conference—have written extensively about how mainstream transgender organizations routinely fail to acknowledge issues that disproportionately affect trans people of color. Just as universalizing views of womanhood that existed within "second wave" feminism were challenged by "third wave" feminists, the universalizing view of transgender people forwarded in the 1990s (which tended to ignore differences with regard to race, class and direction of transition and/or transgender expression) have increasingly been called into question by this "second wave" of transgender activism. Given the violence and extreme poverty that afflicts many trans people, some have suggested that the MWMF trans woman-

exclusion issue has received an undeserved amount of activist attention. And the fact that tickets to this weeklong festival cost several hundred dollars—a luxury many trans folks cannot afford—is often cited by those who view MWMF's policy as primarily a middle-class trans issue. While MWMF is not the most pressing trans-related issue out there, such critiques miss the larger picture. This is not about the desire to simply attend one music festival. Rather, for lesbian and bisexual trans women, this is about us being able to participate in our own queer women's community—a community in which we face anywhere from antagonism to irrelevancy on a regular basis.

Perhaps more importantly, this is about us being able to have a voice within feminism more generally. MWMF is not only the world's largest annual women-only event, but historically it's been a focal point for dialogues and debates on a wide range of feminist issues. As someone who has experienced firsthand the substantial difference between what it's like to be treated as a woman and as a man, and who now experiences both misogyny and trans-misogyny in my day-to-day life, I have found feminism to be an indispensable foundation for me to make sense of my experiences and to articulate the obstacles and issues that I face. For many of us who are trans women, this is about having a voice in a movement that is incommensurably vital to us.

For years, trans women have effectively had no voice in MWMF. During that time, many cissexual women and trans masculine attendees have tried to advocate on our behalf inside the festival. While their intentions may have been sincere, the fact that they entered into a space that excludes trans women, and that they claimed to speak for us (despite not having had a trans female/feminine life experience themselves), their actions further contributed to the erasure of our voices and perspectives. While the "womyn-born-womyn"-only policy remains in effect to this day, MWMF stopped formally expelling trans women from the festival in 2006 (although they still insist that any trans woman who attends is "choosing to disrespect the stated intention of this festival").

How Has Identity Politics Incorporated or Ignored Intersectionality?

While the situation is hardly perfect, it does for the first time allow trans women to speak in their own voices within MWMF. And that's a crucial part of any feminist or activist movement: to allow those who have been marginalized, disenfranchised and excluded to be able to define themselves, and to speak in their own voices about the struggles they face and the way they experience their own lives.