

The Conversation, Section II

Sex Essentialist Discourse

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Section Two: Sex Essentialist Discourse

1. [Sex Essentialist Discourse](#) by [Cristan Williams](#) and [John Stoltenberg](#)

About this installment:

Trans feminist Cristan Williams invites radical feminist John Stoltenberg to the second part of their book-length discussion focusing on the discourse of sex essentialist activists who push sex essentialism as radical feminism itself.

Cristan Williams

I want to shift gears a bit and turn a critical eye to the real world impact of reifying and systematizing an asserted natural sex binary in the name of radical feminism. The price the trans community has paid is like a specter that haunts each word that I write you. So much of what we've been discussing has been circling all of this contextual history, and the process of talking about meanings and representation has made this painful history enormously present for me.

The narrative power of sex essentialist “radical feminist” rhetoric has complemented anti-trans hate within the gay community, fed anti-trans hate in the heteronormative community and made any “woman's” space feel like a coiled snake for me. In no insignificant way, their decades of narrative power recalls the ending of Audre Lorde's speech for me:

Prospero, you are the master of illusion. Lying is your trademark. And you have lied so much to me (Lied about the world, lied about me) That you have ended by imposing on me An image of myself. Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior, That's the way you have forced me to see myself I detest that image! What's more, it's a lie! But now I know you, you old cancer, And I know myself as well.¹

I transitioned during a time when I [learned to fear](#) sex essentialists. I had heard that sex essentialist “radical feminists” wanted to make rape crisis centers [woman-born woman space](#). Nothing [about](#) sex essentialist [rhetoric](#) made it [feel safe](#) for me as a raped trans woman who needed to access help at my local Women's Center. Most of what I'd heard about trans people and rape crisis centers was colored by the controversy sex essentialists cause when they insist that such services should be exclusively provided to cisgender women. I was barely managing the effects of my being raped and knew that I would not be able to cope with an assault upon my selfhood should it come from my provider of rape crisis services and so, I spent a year trying to cope on my own. Eventually, with the firm encouragement of a cis woman who'd used their services, I went to the Center for help. I don't recall a lot from my first counseling session, but what I do remember talking about was my fear of being attacked in that space. In a tangible way, the rhetoric of sex essentialist “radical feminists” robbed me of an entire year of my

life. I spent a year living in constant fear and creeping terror that I would later come to recognize as untreated PTSD because I was exposed to anti-trans sex essentialist “radical feminist” hate.

I want to be respectful of your friendships, and at the same time, it will be difficult to not talk about the real life harm caused to countless trans people in the name of a Radical Feminism focused on reifying a natural sex binary.

John Stoltenberg

Oh, Cristan, you should not feel in any way constrained in our conversation by my mention of the fact that I have known Raymond and Jeffries personally! I never intended that, and it would grieve me if it were so.

I have never communicated with either of them about the themes in this conversation, though I am aware they have each taken public stands that I would disavow as would Andrea. On the off chance that they might one day read this, perhaps understand from it something they had not previously known about Andrea's positions, and perhaps wish to talk, I would be open to such a conversation. But please, please do not say what needs saying! I would be distressed to think that our conversation did not admit of a critique of discourse that does harm!

There is an incredible inscription high up on a wall inside the Library of Congress. It's from Emerson:

WORDS ARE ALSO ACTIONS AND ACTIONS ARE A KIND OF WORDS

I've loved that inscription since I read it many years ago because it flies in the face of a certain liberal view that if harm is done through speech, that speech is exempt from critique and that harm cannot compute as harm. Speech is “only” speech, these liberals like to think—it's “only” words; acts and actions are different. Well, that's nonsense, of course. Speech can have consequences, real consequences in the real world. And just because one has freedom of speech does not mean one is exonerated ethically from

the consequences of one's speech. That's why holding proponents of sex essentialist radical feminist discourse accountable for the real-life consequences of the views and positions they have advocated in the words they have written is such a profoundly important political and ethical endeavor. I wish that the larger debate about sex essentialist radical feminism could focus clearly on its real-life harms instead of personal attacks, and I harbor a hope that your and my conversation will make that more possible.

Back in the 1970s Andrea and I were friends with the lesbian feminist writer Barbara Deming, who to this day is a legend in pacifist circles (she died in 1984). Deming always tried to keep communication channels open even with people with whom she deeply disagreed. She would write long, careful, and caring letters to people whom Andrea and I considered political opponents, enemies even, trying to speak to their humanity in a way that might reach them and edify them and persuade them. The lesson of Deming's profound commitment to authentically human communication across great division has stayed with me, even though as a modality it does not come naturally to me at all. As anyone who knows me knows, I can lob snarky ripostes with ease. But now and then there have been times (such as the present conversation) when the discipline I learned from Deming has come back to me in memory in a way that feels exceedingly important to try my best to practice.

As you know (but some readers of this may not), I have been critiqued and attacked in the online trans/radfem dispute by people who profess sex essentialist radical feminism for things I have said about Andrea's views, which are quite contrary to theirs. Emulating to the best of my ability the discipline I learned from Deming, I have been trying to explain how Andrea has been misrepresented by sex-essentialist radical feminists and co-opted in service of their discourse. I have felt an urgency to do so because Andrea cannot speak for herself anymore (as I know she would want to). She cannot call them out as she did so eloquently in 1977 in a remarkably similar circumstance when Andrea stood up in a room full of female-supremacist lesbian feminists and repudiated their biological-determinist views, which were implicitly sex-essentialist and which she deemed "the most pernicious ideology on the face of the earth" ("[Biological Superiority: The Worlds Most Dangerous and Deadly Idea](#)"). Yet in all my efforts I have felt I was failing her; I have not done justice to what she would have done. So one of the many reasons this conversation with you has become so important to me is that it has become a forum of clarity in which I can reference Andrea's ideas

and influence on me without fear. I'm not deluded that this writing project of ours will be an epiphany for sex-essentialist radical feminists such that they will suddenly see the error of their ways or anything like that. But I do have great hope that it will introduce into the divisiveness a new clarity about the philosophical foundations of the radical feminism that was never not radically inclusive and therefore bring healing and maybe revolutionary hope.

I want more than anything for this conversation to be a forum of clarity without fear for you as well. Always know that. And I promise to try to read carefully and take on board every word of whatever you must say next.



More Information

About: This is a single instalment of a continuing conversation between a trans and radical feminist and is an aspect of [The Conversations Project](#).

Thanks: We would like to thank our supportive partners for making The Conversations Project possible:

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