

## Article

# The Poetics of Coming Out and Being Out: Feminist Activism in Cis Lesbian and Trans Women's Poetic Narratives

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**Abstract:** While coming out or the telling of sexual selves for LGBTQ+ people is often seen as the final step toward living a free and healthy life, lesbians who also identify as feminists embark on a life-long journey in which the plot ebbs and flows around activism and mobilization. Their goal is not only to come out, but to be out. Both cisgender radical-lesbian feminists and trans feminists consider coming out as not only crucial for the realization of self, but also an important tactic for taking up space and intervening in a heteronormative world. But, while the original theories of radical feminism advocated a fierce anti-essentialism, some contemporary radical feminists continue to focus on biology and questions like “what is a woman?” I hope to refocus the question to ask: how are narrative audiences, discursive forms of text, and spaces important for feminists as they realize lesbian or trans identities and communities? Data come from a historical printed newsletter by self-described radical feminists practicing lesbian separatism and two current micro-blogs, one surrounding radical-feminist narratives and the other around trans feminism. Through a textual analysis, I show how self-proclaimed radical feminists and trans feminists use poetic and emotive writing to produce different kinds of narratives about coming out and being out in different spaces and for unique audiences. Ultimately, these discursive forms are important for communities as members' stories challenge and are impacted by public narratives of gender, essentialism, and cis- and hetero-normativity.

**Keywords:** gender; lesbian; separatism; essentialism; trans women; LGBTQ+; narrative; social media; feminism

## 1. Introduction

I venture out,  
away from the clearly marked path  
to explore what lies beyond.  
The grass is lush and green.  
The meadow fragrance  
makes me dizzy with delight.  
I am captivated  
by a rainbow in the distance.  
I run towards it  
with all my might,  
drawn like a magnet. . . —C.B. [Womyn's Words] (WEB 1996)

In modern times, the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) community proudly flies rainbow flags as symbols of pride. However, it was not until 1978 that Gilbert Baker, an openly gay man and drag queen, designed the first Pride Flag as a way to remain visible in a heteronormative

culture—as a way to come out to the world and to center queer identities (Rapp 2002). And as C.B. describes above, the rainbow symbolizes not only pride, but joy, safety, and solidarity—a realization of self. When it comes to LGBTQ+ life, coming out is among the most widely theorized about aspects of Western lives (Zimman 2009)—perhaps the most widely utilized narrative. Under heteronormativity or the belief that heterosexuality and the gender binary are the norm, the practice of revealing stigmatized sexual desires is considered pivotal for realizing a LGBTQ+ self. And, over the past three decades scholars have studied sexualities and continue to point out the limitations of an emphasis on the closet as a typified experience (Seidman et al. 1999). Others have also criticized the way the closet reinforces the binary between gay and straight (Sedgwick 1990). Either way, the poetic methods by which members come out and the spaces where these processes happen can become embedded with feelings of ownership, pride, and nostalgia.

In the United States, feminist theorizing about lesbian identities began as an outgrowth of the 1960s and 1970s women's liberation movement and lesbian political movement with the idea that the personal is political. Through consciousness-raising, lesbianism was theorized as “feminist theory in action” (Abbott and Love 1973, p. 136) to privilege communities of women. The original tenants of radical feminism also spoke to those women who identified (and who were identified) as “unacceptable women . . . those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older . . . ” (Lorde 2003, p. 26). At its core, radical feminism is about consciousness-raising away from people in power as a way to critique patriarchy or the social and sexual dominance of women by men (Giardina 2003). It is about questioning the private sphere, especially sexuality and the normalization of heterosexuality, as imbued with politics. Through the recognition of embodied experiences, it is also about the poetic connection between the personal and the political. As C.B. expressed above, women were in search of spaces that allowed for political activity, but also for those spaces that allowed members to create the poetic methods of coming out, identity work, and other embodied and emotional experiences. While the telling of sexual selves for LGB people is seen as “the last step in overcoming social stigma and moving toward leading a healthy ‘normal’ life” (Crawley and Broad 2004, p. 49), feminist coming out stories often reflect a life-long journey in which the plot ebbs and flows around preserving feminist mobilization. Their goal is to not only come out, but to be out—to live openly and freely.

While fierce anti-essentialism was at the heart of original radical feminist thought, trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) seem to dominate the movement today. Some radical-lesbian-feminist groups have prioritized the needs of cisgender women or those who have “a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, p. 461). This has created conflict between cis lesbians and transgender activists, trans lesbians, and trans feminists or those who consider trans women's liberation to be important for the liberation of all women (Koyama 2003). In the academy, this decades-old divide began with the work of trans exclusionary radical feminists like Janice Raymond (1979) and Sheila Jeffreys (2014) who believe that trans women are not really women. From there, the divide has reached a boiling point on social media. Some argue that lesbians are systematically erased and ignored within male-dominated LGBTQ+ activism and that trans activism harms women (Compton 2019). Others agree that it is precisely essentialism and the allegiance to biology that has stalled the feminist movement (Earles 2019). As I will argue, however, both groups consider coming out or declaring oneself as lesbian and/or trans as crucial for the realization of self. Being out or openly lesbian and/or trans to the world also helps individuals construct communities and to take up space in a heteronormative culture. With coming out and being at as my focus, I ask: how are narrative audiences, discursive forms of text, and spaces important for feminists as they realize lesbian or trans identities and communities? With this, I hope to show how the coming out experience toward the realization of lesbian and/or trans identities can be about the everyday methodologies of activists rather than biology.

## 2. Data and Methods

Data for this study come from a 1980s–2000s printed newsletter written by cisgender radical-lesbian feminists practicing lesbian separatism and two current micro-blogs, one organized around radical feminism and the other around trans feminism. Feminist newsletters stemmed from the 1970s women’s movement and created a space for activists to write about potentially sensitive issues in safety for an audience of fellow activists. While mainstream media outlets were not always sympathetic to feminist pursuits, the newsletter allowed communities to organize under consensus-based processes in which all members could participate. Newsletters became beloved members of the community. And, much like the exchange of feminist newsletters and zines, online textual networks like blogs also contribute to feminist organizing and the dissemination of feminist ideologies, goals, and strategies (Crossley 2015). Bloggers write for large, diverse, and mostly unknown audiences through back-and-forth conversations that are situated amid a virtual sphere that can be hostile to feminist ideas. Online storytellers are also attuned to concepts and theories like intersectionality and white privilege that were still being developed in the 1980s. Both, however, provide members with a kind of instruction manual for how to practice and talk about feminism locally and online.

I use data I collected in a university’s Special Collections—*Womyn’s Words* (dates 05/1983 to 04/2013: 3554 pages) and two Tumblr micro-blogs [#radicalfeminism](#) (2015) (472 pages) and [#transfeminism](#) (2015), 472 pages and 163 pages respectively. Tumblr fulfills several criteria outlined by Boellstorff et al. (2012) for a virtual ethnography in that it is multi-user, shared, persistent, and constantly evolving. Tumblr is also where the conflict between radical feminism and trans women is manifesting and makes up another cohort of activists. For each data set, I relied on my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB)’s decision that this data is considered public and does not need IRB approval. However, because *Womyn’s Words* represents a small, local community, I chose to use given aliases or initials to distinguish between authors. If no author name was given, I leave that information out. And, while Tumblr bloggers are required to create a username and password to post comments, they do not need one to observe. Here, I use usernames—if provided—to distinguish between authors. During the analysis, I used NVivo 10 (QSR International Pty Ltd 2011) to develop narrative codes about characters, plots, settings, themes, conflict, audience, and so forth.

By centering these storytellers, I provide a textual analysis to show coming-out and being-out narratives surrounding radical-lesbian feminism and trans feminism make use of poetic and emotive writing to build bottom-up theories that serve women (Earles 2017). I hope to show how poetic coming out stories, coupled with the feminist process of being out, serve as an intervention into a patriarchal and heteronormative culture that sees both cis lesbians and trans women as less than women. In the documentary *After Stonewall* (Scagliotti 1999), cisgender lesbians talked about how important poetry was in connecting with other women during the movements of the 1960s and 1970s. And, in the communities that formed during the 1980s and beyond, emotive writing signified the creation of history, community and identity. Likewise, the book, *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (2013), is one of the first written collectively about trans experiences. One of the contributors, trans-woman-poet Jennifer Espinoza, said, “[With poetry], it’s easier to say things that haven’t been put into words before” (Fitzpatrick 2015). Poetry and emotive writing allow trans women to counter cishnormativity and the assumption that all people are cisgender (Schilt and Westbrook 2009, p. 461). And, for those who identify as radical-lesbian and trans feminists, poetry has become vital in the production of cultural meaning through which members have come out, created history, community, and identity (Garber 2012). This moves us away from essentialist questions about “who is a woman?” to more strategic questions about how to use everyday methods like poetic consciousness-raising to organize and to rebuild the world around us in a feminist way. After all, as Lorde (2003) wrote, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (pp. 25–28). In other words, the patriarchal tools of gender policing cannot tear down the gender binary that oppresses us all.

Methodologically, I take up Loseke’s (2016) theory of the narrative productions of meaning to show how the everyday stories feminist tell, whether through poetry or a reproduction of theory, are impacted

by and challenge broader public meanings surrounding gender and essentialism. This theory centers not solely on those narratives used in sensemaking (Maines 2001) or those stories people write and tell about themselves (Baker 1996; Godwin 2004), but even more so on how public narratives circulate within and are challenged by these stories. Stories that disseminate in the public realm resemble small stories in that they are composed of scenes, plots, and characters, and contain moral lessons. Unlike small stories, however, socially-circulating stories typically have multiple authors and are constantly challenged and modified in response to other narratives, current events, and cultural change (Loseke 2016). By connecting the stories that flow through the social world via text, blogs, and so forth with broader meanings, researchers can better understand how communication is widely understood by diverse audiences and how it reflects, perpetuates, and/or challenges shared ways of thinking. After all, it is through this connection that we can see how ideas surrounding gender, essentialism, and cis- and hetero-normativity, for example, are used to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and moralities over time in order to tell different stories. It is through this method that we can also see how other aspects of narrative productions surrounding these concepts circulate unchallenged to perpetuate ideas about bodies, boundaries, and exclusion. Here, texts arise as activist objects in relationship to their work and in their distinctive relations with the surrounding social world (Smith 1990b). As analysts, we must locate the controlling frameworks and interpretive schemata provided by those social relations to understand the intention of the texts and how distinctive methods of telling are grounded in lived actuality (Smith 1990b).

Textual or document analysis is a suitable technique for this analysis as it requires that data be examined and interpreted so as to draw out meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge about the broader world (Atkinson and Coffey 1997; Bowen 2009; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Diamond 2006; Rapley 2007; Smith 1990a, 1990b, 2001; Ng 1995). And, in a comparative analysis of historical and contemporary texts, a textual analysis helps to describe the trajectory of narratives so as to show how they are produced over time. Analysis specifically focuses on how ideas, practices, and identities, emerge, transform, mutate, and become the relatively durable things we take for granted (Rapley 2007). Textual analysis also encourages us to think about how the data is organized, what is in the data and what is not, and how some ideas and practices fail while others survive (Rapley 2007).

### 3. Results

The first part of my analysis is grounded in the analysis of printed newsletters collectively written by self-identified radical-lesbian feminists in Western Florida. In 1982, they began meeting monthly in what they called Salons, named after the cultural and intellectual collectives of Revolutionary France. Within the first year, Salon feminists formed the collective, Women's Energy Bank (WEB 1983–2014), and began publishing their newsletter, *Womyn's Words*. Over the years, the women grew together to incorporate consensus decision-making, nonviolent conflict resolution, and feminist practices and activism. They held Salon programs about coming and being out, body image, fat oppression, ageism, sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, journal writing and even financial planning, technical skills, substance, addiction, relationship challenges, health, art, history, and BDSM (bondage, dominance/submission, sadomasochism).

Together, they traveled to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the Southern Women's Music Festival, Take Back the Night, Pride festivals, and other feminist and lesbian gatherings. It was in Michigan where they learned many of the ideologies they put into practice locally—a cis lesbian gathering that editors described as “magic” and “addicting” (WEB 1983). And in their local community, members endeavored to create a special place just for lesbians. As one editor wrote:

The common bond that unites all of us who read this paper is that we identify ourselves as Lesbians. We support one another in our growing pride in choosing and pursuing the way of life that being a Lesbian entails. We no longer request, we demand, that society accept us. We know we are right in what we are doing—and we also know from painful experience that ours is a rough road and will be for at least another generation.

Some of us have the luxury of being out at work. Some of us can dress comfortably—in proper “dyke fashion” I suppose—because our jobs allow us to do that. But no all of us are that lucky. Some of us wear skirts and panty hose because that is appropriate for our jobs—and who has the right to criticize us for that?

Some of us hold down true establishment, patriarchal jobs. That is a choice we have made. We may or may not be right about that. However, I might point out that that establishment money goes a long way towards supporting women’s bookstores, Michigan, and many of our important causes. If we allow our groups to be made up of women who agree with us on every issue, our support groups will be small indeed. Diversity has helped us grow strong enough to make the changes which we must make if all of us are to survive. We demand acceptance from outside; let us begin by accepting one another—P. (WEB 1984).

Through this process of coming out to one another, Salon feminists created a space for themselves. And, every year, they collectively celebrated Salon’s anniversary with a birthday party to honor women. At its height, the mailing list was over 250 subscribers, designed specifically for “womyn-born women.” Indeed, some radical-lesbian feminists have used the term “womyn-born women” to mean “women who were born as women, who have lived their entire experience as women, and who identify as women” (Vogel 2014). While early issues of *Womyn’s Words* reflected that “[m]any male-to-female transsexuals consider themselves womyn-born womyn because they have felt female from birth” (WEB 1992), later issues described trans women as “men in dresses” (WEB 2002). As I will show, the early push for “diversity” was later challenged as feminist activism moved into online spaces and as the local group turned more and more to theory to answer questions like “what is a woman?”. More generally, however, early cis lesbian activists saw separatism as a way to actively oppose public narratives that perpetuate patriarchy.

As radical-lesbian feminists, *Women’s Words* storytellers also produced community as a way to lay claim to textual spaces and to forge a political and cultural network of women. While poetic stories about coming out as both lesbians and feminists remained an important part of the community and newsletter, Salon feminists also prioritized the burgeoning radical feminist literature. While academic and activist literature are certainly important for developing knowledge claims, as well as strategic feminist goals and plans, poetic stories continue to be important for creating and fostering spaces that empower local communities. In other words, consciousness-raising is done in real time, rather than objectively from above. However, as the community grew to over 65, members seemed to abandon local theory-making strategies centered on poetic writing for a more top-down model that centered on exclusion. Ultimately, as trans women attempted to join the community and as the broader feminist movement migrated online, WEB disbanded in the early 2000s. *Womyn’s Words* moved online in 2011 after its publication was taken over by a third party. It was published until 2013.

### 3.1. *The Politics of Belonging and Home: Coming Out as Lesbian and Feminist*

Salon feminists shared their coming out stories with a closed-circuit of other lesbians. Some members wrote that coming out meant “to let our families, friends and those we encounter in our daily lives know our truths/realities and, in so doing, validate our wholeness”—N. (WEB 1987). However, some wrote that they were “still not out at my job because it would mean being fired”—L.L. (WEB 1995). In the time frame in which early editions of *Womyn’s Words* were produced, coming out and being out were two different processes. More specifically, coming out might mean to declare your sexual identity to yourself and to those closest to you while not necessarily “being out” in public. Here, even when members felt “shy,” Salon-goers were “welcome to listen to other womyn’s stories without any pressure to tell your own” (WEB 1990). In this space, coming out was the first step in which members declared themselves to one another using *Womyn’s Words* as a way to coordinate these stories in a separate space. One Salon feminist wrote:



Coming Out  
 To be among my sisters  
 Give a new dimension to myself.  
 To be where I belong  
 Can't be compared  
 With anything on earth.  
 A realization of a self  
 Lost in a stranger world  
 Who found a place  
 To be fulfilled and rest.  
 I search my entire life  
 Among different dimensions  
 All of them enriched me  
 Preparing me for this occasion.  
 I knew very early in life.  
 That I was different  
 And I fought with all my heart  
 What I thought was strange and  
 Only when I allowed myself to  
 drift free in those tumultuous  
 waters,  
 I was carried away by nature  
 To the mystic oasis.  
 It was meant to be mine  
 And the happiness and peace  
 I felt, assured me  
 That the search was over.  
 I was at last home! —V. (WEB 1983)

For V. and other Salon feminists, the textual and physical spaces created by lesbians became the home they could not find anywhere else. Coming out, as V. described, was about expressing a kind of deep knowing that could not be realized in a heteronormative culture. It was about searching the world for a place to belong and finding it amongst other lesbians. While belonging is about emotional attachment (Ignatieff 2001), belonging also becomes political when members understand their sexual and emotional desires as threatened in some way. Indeed, early Salon stories challenged oppressive public narratives as members expanded gendered and sexual categories to include women who love other women. But, by also making the everyday connection between coming out and patriarchy, members challenged the language available to feminist claimmakers by developing their own heroines, morals, plots, codes, and herstories. Members used metaphors about narrative space in their textual descriptions of Salon as “a land of Oz—a place where women could laugh and play and be true to themselves . . . a warm embrace . . . home” (WEB 2003) in order to take up space amid heteronormativity. Narratives countered those of “the closet” in which participants wrote of the pain of loneliness and the fragmentation of identity, even as some Salon feminists were not necessarily “out” in public spaces. As a result, the narrative codes that were developed surrounding members’ coming out stories stuck to the spaces of Salon and *Womyn’s Words* as members asserted a kind of moral ownership through the conceptualization of home—this was now a cis lesbian space.

#### “For Its True Name Is Love”: How Storytellers Use Nostalgia and Home

If patriarchy moved members to organize, then poetic and emotive writing initially allowed Salon feminists to challenge public narratives and power relationships about gender and sexuality through a collective coming out and eventual being out. In print, revealing the “truth” of one’s lesbianism

was not only connected to an unburdening of self-destructive lies, but also with a distinctive lesbian herstory. The latter has political implications in the sense that members are, once again, taking up space previously occupied by heteronormative gender. One Salon feminist wrote:

Deep Inside/Please Look  
 Please begin to look  
 deep inside  
 don't be afraid  
 of what you'll find  
 beneath the brainwashed surface  
 of your mind  
  
 I can see what you feel  
 (you can't deny what shows in your eyes)  
 It has survived  
 since the Amazon gays  
 through the dark ages  
 and the Puritan days  
  
 It cannot be destroyed  
 but it can be denied  
 You're only cheating yourself  
 if it stays hidden inside.  
  
 It's been smothered by fear  
 and hate and lies  
 through centuries on earth  
 it's had to wear a disguise  
  
 But it's time to come out now  
 let not hate and fear prevail  
 for its true name is love; and  
 it will not fail —C.W. (WEB 1984)

Here, poems were not only about a single heroine, but also about and for other members within the community. Storytellers like C.W. built upon cultural narratives including in *Womyn's Words* that referenced lesbian authors like Sappho and Radclyffe Hall and even subversive lesbian references in popular culture like Cagney and Lacey (WEB 1983). In this sense, the "brainwashed surface" C.W. wrote about could mean the patriarchal education that prioritizes the history and accomplishments of men. That, once again, there is somehow a sense of deep knowing that connects all lesbians together and that women themselves need to come out to realize that self in order to be happy. In this sense, Salon feminists used *Womyn's Words* as a way to organize a communal coming out and to encourage others to be out using narratives that were still being developed. And, while coming out and being out were certainly seen as the road toward happiness and feeling "whole," it was also viewed as a way to, as C.W. wrote above, not let "hate and fear prevail." But, even as these everyday methods of coming out and the connection to something "true" began to appear naturalized over time, they also offered up a communal lineage that defied the prescriptions of normative femininity and enabled members to strategize for a future based on these revelations. And, as a way to resist the prescriptive components of heteronormative culture, Salon feminists often evoked notions of "home." While imperfect, lesbian "idylls" or utopias have been used historically as a way to rework dominant spaces and to question the norms of heterosexuality through opposition (Browne 2011), particularly when they are based on members' consciousness-raising.

It is important to note that the narratives which centered on characters like the Amazons or fantasy worlds tend to romanticize the tribal cultures that have been marginalized under advanced

capitalism and colonization. While these narratives may be a way to create “imagined communities” (Crowley 1999) and a sense of space that is an “oasis,” the idea of the free lesbian tribe may be modeled after a nostalgic vision of something that may have never happened. These narratives also speak to the feminist goal of rewriting the center to suit particular (but not all) identities, rather than living and thriving in the margins. To be fair, this style of telling is not limited to Salon feminists at the time. Concepts like intersectionality (Crenshaw 1990) and white privilege (McIntosh 1988) were not yet circulating within the burgeoning literature. The practice of prioritizing sexism is, however, found in works like Rich’s (1980) forward to *The Coming Out Stories*. These narratives also manifest in the idea that cis lesbians are “better feminists” than straight, bisexual, or otherly-defined women as problems like racism, classism, and other systems of discrimination were not widely addressed among “women-identified women” (Phelan 1993).

Americans often feel nostalgia and sentimentality about home; however, when one’s family home, neighborhoods, and even public, hangout spaces feel hostile, marginalized communities create their own homes and spaces. For Salon feminists, home was constructed through coming- and being-out narratives and were coordinated through *Womyn’s Words* and Salon. As a result, members celebrated *Womyn’s Words* anniversaries and Salon “birthdays” through poetry. One Salon feminist wrote:

#### The Beginning of Home

It was seven years ago  
when we walked into that room.  
We were the new womyn in town then  
Curious, excited, and desperate for the company  
of womyn.

A woman at the bookstore  
had told us about Salon  
so we drove across the bridge  
walked into that room  
and we knew, then, that we had found them.  
“Whew, beebee,” she said to me  
with relief in her eyes.  
“there are dykes in Florida.”

A week later we again  
made that trip across the bridge. . .  
It was the beginning of family.  
It was the beginning of home.

. . . I grew into separatism and left this place  
to grow in other ways.

. . . There are reasons for everything  
they say.  
There must be reasons I went away  
and reasons I returned  
And, most important,  
there are reasons why I love you.  
You’re strong and brave  
Feisty and powerful  
Intelligent and gentle  
supportive and challenging  
I can grow here, in this soil,  
fed by the energy in this room,



watered by the tears we shed together,  
 nurtured again and again by your affection.  
 You were each a star to guide me  
 Home to you. where I belong —K.W. (WEB 1990)

This poem was written to “commemorate the 7th anniversary of my first Salon meeting . . . ” and as “a gift to the community, to the family I have here, as a reminder of how special we are.” While American narratives often tell of personal sacrifice and individualism, Salon feminists weaved together collective narratives about “home” for specific audiences that became embedded in particular spaces. As K.W. wrote above, Salon became a living thing and an important part of this lesbian and feminist community. Poems like that of K.W. assume an audience who understands the coming-out and being-out experiences as positive and empowering—an experience that helped to create a body of knowledge about identifying as a cis lesbian and a radical feminist under heteronormativity. As Goulding (1999) writes, “Nostalgia is more than just memory; it is memory with the pain taken away. It involves a bittersweet longing for an idealized past which no longer exists” (p. 2). Indeed, previous and emerging generations often react against the accelerating technical social and cultural changes taking place by tying themselves to the masts of the yesteryears. Even though, “[t]here must be reasons I went away,” as K.W. wrote above, conflicts at Salon and in the pages of *Womyn’s Words* were often quieted as memories of a “supportive” and “nurtur[ing]” family and home won out. Here, the heroines of the past are inserted into the narrative so that time becomes braided and any conflicts or problems of the past are erased.

Salon feminists, however, did experience the backlash amid the Reagan years and the 1990s abortion debates that refocused issues of the body within the movement. Members also watched as feminists switched up their mobilizations strategies to include online organizing. D. wrote:

The world is becoming more open, informal and connection to events more accessible . . .  
 Salon, in the beginning was a unique forum and meeting place. There were few places for women to interact. Through Salon, people gained friends who formed changing and expanding networks . . . It would be preferable to have Salon continue in some form that fulfills a present need. It is also imperative that women wanting to see this continue become involved to some degree. Those who carried the burden for others to enjoy all those years have served so remarkably well and they need relief. Whatever evolves, Salon has been a wonderful, enriching, powerful, meaning[ful] force in so many lives. And those who began it and maintained it for so long deserve our deepest gratitude—D. (WEB 2000).

D. reflects on the ongoing and everchanging process of coming out and being out. In many ways, it is not something that happens once and is never to be thought of again. It takes work to stay out. Over the years, however, the newsletter was in danger of discontinuing four times due to lack of participation in its production. In response, members evoked nostalgia and textual uniqueness to rally support: “Our community now has countless websites and schlepsites . . . But there is only one *Womyn’s Words*—please support our community’s printed world. When it’s gone—it’s gone” (WEB 2008). After all, it is in print and for an audience of cis lesbian separatists that members countered public narratives about gender and sexuality to develop expanded codes. As a result, even as *Womyn’s Words* advertised a Salon planned by “Girl Geeks [who] will take you through the several interesting computer processes, photo restoration, web design, auction sites, and more!” (WEB 2001), members mourned the loss of the printed newsletter.

In the face of change, Salon feminists’ fear of invisibility meant that members solidified their boundaries, including those around lived and textual spaces and those about the body. This can set up lines between “us” and “them” whether it is in terms of space, form, or audiences which can be fueled by biological essentialism. If coming out and being out are tied to the particular sexual identities of lesbian and cis women, then members may not know how to communicate with more open audiences whose perceived oppressions might be different from their own—the space, language, and narratives

become cis-centered. When members preface “expressing my true self” in “the most important journey I could have gone on” with “[t]he search for my self in a male-oppressive world”—D.J. (WEB 1997), they connect coming out with a particular kind of feminism that prioritizes those who were assigned female at birth. This reveals how public narratives of gender and essentialism can start to circulate within these seemingly closed spaces. While Salon feminists expanded narrative codes, they were not radicalized.

### 3.2. *Tumblr as the Entry Point for Understanding Radical Feminism Online*

Social media (e.g., Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) is the starting point many activists now use to launch into various virtual worlds. The microblogging site, Tumblr, is one place where the conflict between self-described radical and trans feminists is manifesting and makes up another cohort of activists (see [Goldberg 2014](#); [Loza 2014](#)). Microblogging is a type of blogging in which users write about themselves and send updates to friends and followers. At the time of this project, there were roughly 163.9 million blogs and 72 billion posts on Tumblr. (1) 31% of all visitors are in the U.S.; (2) the average user visits about 67 pages every month; (3) Tumblr is most popular with 18-to-29 year olds; (4) 16% of Tumblr visitors are Latino, 13% are Black, and 14% are white—data about other racial groups was unavailable; (5) 51% of U.S. users identify as male, while most of the other 49% either identifies as female or does not identify in terms of sex or gender ([Costill 2014](#)). Unlike social media networks like Facebook, however, Tumblr bloggers adopt pseudonyms to hide their offline identities behind unique usernames in a way that often prevents in-person interactions ([Hart 2015](#)). And, given that virtual spaces are massive, diverse, and mostly unknown to any particular storyteller, narrative productions happen in constant completion with other stories and amongst a more public audience. Compared to printed newsletters, anyone can contribute in an unedited format, which makes Tumblr a particularly attractive space for collective theories of feminism to flourish.

The data set #radicalfeminism was gathered in 2015 on Tumblr and comprises all the micro-blogs organized by this hashtag. Observers read Tumblr in reverse order and, unless removed by Tumblr, users see all posts, which appear as a communal stream of consciousness organized by self-identifying hashtags. While Twitter has a short length limitation for posts, Tumblr does not. Tumblr also supports multimedia posts like images, audios, and videos. Bloggers can post from anywhere at any time and “follow” one another, reblog one another’s post, click on a link to that user’s larger blog housed on another site, and make notes about other people’s posts. While it is impossible to determine whether or not these bloggers also identify as cis women, their overall perspectives about trans women identify them as overwhelmingly “trans exclusionary.” While I analyzed #radicalfeminism in an attempt to connect print narratives with those appearing online, I found that Tumblr bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism no longer make use of poetry and prose. Instead of the bottom-up method of consciousness-raising used in the early days of Salon, #radicalfeminism seems to reflect the later methods of Salon organizing and the top-down academic theorizing with no basis in interaction. In this sense, public narratives of gender and essentialism might be expanded for cis lesbians, but not upended.

#### “It’s Not All about ‘Genitals’: Narratives and Audiences in Online Spaces

“[F]ollow[ing] all the lesbian feminists ... on Tumblr” and “learning about other women’s sexuality” situates #radicalfeminism as a space for bloggers to theorize about political lesbianism in front of a public audience. This creates new possibilities for members to reach across boundaries and audiences to make new affiliations, identifications, and alliances. “Following” and “sharing” also spread a feminist perspective into dominant discourse and spaces. Rather than carving out a separate space for radical-lesbian feminists, hashtags make it possible to enact change in dominant spaces. However, apart from posts quoting scholars like Adrienne Rich in which users like femalestevebuscemi write that “[t]he assumption that ‘most women are innately heterosexual’ stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for many women,” I found only one post in which a blogger self-identifies as a lesbian. In it, ruthgreenb writes:

And as a lesbian, I much prefer women. This is not about genitals. But I simply much prefer being with women. I prefer how they think, behave and treat me as another woman. I don't want the casual sexism that men routinely display. I love women. And yes I love sex with women too. I am not interested in penis in vagina sex. I love making love to a woman and having her make love to me in return . . . To simply talk about lesbianism as if it was all about genitals, shows a deep lack of understanding of what it actually means to be a lesbian.

In the early days of *Womyn's Words*, many Salon feminists told their coming out stories. They were ones of pain, joy, space and community. As storytellers came out, their narratives became more about being out as political activists to an audience who shared their language and beliefs. On Tumblr, however, Ruthgreenb writes frankly about her own experiences as a lesbian, bodies, and sex—this reflects a narrative of being out. The audience does not hear a story of loneliness or confusion; instead, she moves directly toward a connection between her identity as a lesbian and one of feminism. While other bloggers write about the “vagina [as] the part of us that men want to penetrate” (genderheretic), Ruthgreenb reflects on her lived experiences as a way to intervene in the production of essentialist narratives of gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity. So, while past efforts to expand gender and sexual narratives were all about using text to create and organize coming-out and being-out narratives for an audience of lesbians, the transference of radical feminism online could mean that #radicalfeminism is merely about lesbians (for a public audience) rather than for lesbians (for a lesbian audience).

Online audiences can certainly vary across lines of gender and sexualities and the goal within #radicalfeminism seems to be about convincing public audiences that sexism is real. As a result, feminists rely on the theories of scholars like Andrea Dworkin to appeal to audiences using logic or academic heroines and those narrative scenes, plots, and morals that depend on public narratives. On #radicalfeminism, hepburnedsuntorytime quotes Dworkin's *Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politic*:

And what are we to think? Because if we begin to piece together all of the instances of violence—the rapes, the assaults, the crippings, the killings, the mass slaughters; if we read their novels, poems, political and philosophical tracts and see that they think of us today what the Inquisitors thought of us yesterday; if we realize that historically gynocide is not some mistake, some accidental excess, some dreadful fluke, but is instead the logical consequence of what they believe to be our god-given or biological natures; then we must finally understand that under patriarchy gynocide is the ongoing reality of life lived by women . . .

Here, the only reference to poetry is placed in the hands of the “Inquisitors” rather than with radical-lesbian feminists who are working toward being out. Interestingly, what is missing in this quote is the next sentence in this passage in which Dworkin (1982) writes, “ . . . then we must look to each other—for the courage to bear it and for the courage to change it” (p. 19). In virtual spaces where audiences are open and unknown, it seems that bloggers posting on #radicalfeminism make use of academic theories as a way to convince, defend, and legitimize the claims about women's oppression by those assigned male at birth. What is not there, however, is the call for feminists to form communities and emotional connections based on these experiences. There is no “home” from which members come out communally and through which narratives are expanded and formed for a lesbian audience. Indeed, as the interactions are not based on the lesbian processes of coming out and being out, poetry or emotional experiences are no longer relevant. What remains relevant, however, seems to be the body and the boundary work established and perpetuated by those public narratives and theorists who situate trans women as male.

To be sure, Salon feminists also focused on bodies and, more specifically genitals (Earles 2019). However, it was perhaps their poetic methods of coming out and being out that was so attractive to the trans women who attempted to join, but who were ultimately excluded. Online, however, the focus is on the unequal relationship between those who were assigned female at birth and those

who were assigned male. This sets up Tumblr as more of a space of conflict or a battleground in which discursive wars about gender and sexuality are enacted. For instance, one trans woman, user tonidorsay, wrote over a dozen posts and asserted images of her face and body in the radicalfeminism hashtag. While many trans feminists created their own hashtag through which Tumblr users could come out and be out as trans, tonidorsay's presence on #radicalfeminism meant that this space could no longer be interpreted as cis-centric. As audiences scroll through the hashtag, they witness the intervention of essentialist narratives as they happen. This was not possible in separatist spaces like Salon.

### 3.3. Tumblr as the Entry Point for Understanding Trans Feminism Online

Transgender activists point to the Internet as a harbinger of productive growth for the movement. Social media and blogging in particular have allowed people to make contacts in urban and rural areas, to educate themselves and others, and to mobilize without ever having to come out in public as trans (Shapiro 2008). For trans women, in particular, Tumblr is a kind of hashtag feminism that allows those who were previously silenced to broaden and radically redefine feminism online. Once again, this data set was gathered in 2015 on Tumblr and comprises all the micro-blogs organized by the hashtag transfeminism. Readers cannot tell whether or not bloggers who post on #transfeminism identify as trans or cis; however, the overall ideas and theories used situate this hashtag as "trans inclusive." While self-described radical and trans feminists often find themselves on opposite sides of the exclusion/inclusion debates and generally create their own spaces, the two groups are similarly theorizing about their coming-out and being-out experiences in terms of discursive form. Both groups use poetry to form narratives about these processes and to collectively and emotionally appeal to their audiences. This is how they undermine essentialism and normativities by being out. However, when trans women come out online in these spaces, they make (and have always made) connections with cis and trans women of any sexual orientation.

#### 3.3.1. Changing Up Audiences, Recentering the Body: Trans-Feminist Narratives Online

Like other kinds of feminists, trans feminists carry the double burden of a complicated coming out and being out processes. Coming out does not necessarily result in a happy, "normal" in which they are accepted by the world. It is, however, about actively sharing stories to understand community issues—about connecting the personal with the political. On #transfeminism, vilaniaminha, writes:

From my own personal analysis and conversations with fellow trans women I've seen how complicated our lives are and my personal theory is that we internalize things at a deep subconscious level based on our true identities. This leads to how often times people can sense something different about us before we come out. Or how often we share experiences with cis women.

While there has been an insurgence of trans organizations over the past 40 years and remaining in the closet is not as common than it used to be, it can still be difficult for trans people to publicly be out for a cis-centric audience. Just as trans women may identify as women, some may be perceived of as men. For others whose gender may align with how others perceive them, coming out and being out means revealing a gender history that describes crossing social boundaries. Even as I cannot make the assumption that all women publishing under #transfeminism identify as trans, the bloggers' stance make it clear that they write from a trans feminist perspective. This shifts the audiences in that the narrator assumes her readers already have a complicated gender history of their own, whether trans or cis. Unlike feminists coming out and being out in separatist print spaces, bloggers posting on #transfeminism articulate a connection across the lines of cis and trans to expand symbolic boundaries and to blur the lines between "us" and "them." On #transfeminism, smith-q-and-a, also writes:

How to Love a Trans Woman

If she offers you breastbone

Aching to carve soft fruit from its branches

Though there may be more tissue in the lining of her bra  
 Than the flesh that rises to meet it  
 Let her ripen in your hands.  
 Imagine if she'd lost those swells to cancer,  
 Diabetes,  
 A car accident instead of an accident of genetics  
 Would you think of her as less a woman then?  
 Then think of her as no less one now

Poetic writing such as this centers on a desire for “wholeness” by approaching sex and the non-essential body in a way that Salon feminists and #radicalfeminism did not. Indeed, Tumblr bloggers on #transfeminism like smith-q-and-a draw on narratives of the affected and disruptive body to interrogate and disrupt the gender binary (Koyama 2003). Smith-q-and-a also makes a particular claim connecting her body with those who have had cancer, diabetes, or suffered through a car accident as a way to assert legitimacy in her claim that trans concerns are important in both the personal and political. Given the historical progression of feminist literature on the body, it makes sense that these issues are particularly salient in trans narratives. Body management becomes a part of how women constrain and discipline their bodies to align with normative constructs of femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987). As a result, while the coming out process may be nostalgically empowering for cis feminists, bloggers posting on #transfeminism write about a gender history in which the body is troubled. In turn, this also troubles the coming out process as audiences are seen as both empathetic in terms of their own troubled gender history and potentially antagonistic to trans issues. This works to radicalize public narratives about gender, sexuality, heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Trans feminists are not only expanding public narratives about gender and sexuality, but they are also asserting themselves into feminist herstory in a way that complicates narratives about normative femininity and women's bodies. Body confidence and acceptance becomes an ongoing project that does not end at coming out. Indeed, these stories assert a more inclusive way of being out that is ongoing and everchanging.

A note on the “wrong body” model is also important here. This model is used to describe the idea that trans people experience a “misalignment between gender and the sexed body” (Bettcher 2014). One version describes a medical condition called transsexuality and then, through surgery, a person “becomes” a woman. The strong version claims that a person has always been a woman or man and is, therefore, “trapped in the wrong body.” However, neither model addresses how trans women experience both sexual oppression as women and transphobia as trans—this is important for both coming out and being out. While we might read the narratives above as residual stories resulting from ideas about a naturalized identity and the medicalization of bodies, I read them as feminist interrogation of difference. Rather than living stealthy or writing about their experiences as either women or as trans, both write for blended audiences to challenge how we think about identities and bodies. If cisnormativity holds all women to the impossible standards of normative femininity, then trans women exemplify the troubled history between these notions and individual bodies. And, if cis lesbians are oppressed by systems of sexism, racism, and capitalism, then these systems can also oppress women because they are trans, causing loneliness and rejection.

### 3.3.2. “It Is Time for a Feminism of the Monstrous”: Trans-Feminist Narratives Online

Like those posting on #radicalfeminism, bloggers on #transfeminism also make references to theorists of the past and present. For instance, pulangpluma, quotes Stryker (2011)'s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix” by writing that “I defy th[e] Law in my refusal to abide by [gender's] original decree . . . Though I may not hold the stylus myself, I can move beneath it for my own deep self-sustaining pleasures.” In her essay, Stryker finds a deep affinity with the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* who also often feels less than human. Because of her contradictory embodiment and exclusion from other communities, Stryker directs her rage



against the institutions under which she must exist. Bloggers writing on #transfeminism carry on these narratives to virtually embody the monster, thereby disrupting public narratives of normative femininity, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity. Again, this is how the plot ebbs and flows and how trans feminists develop collective narratives with calls to action, an important component of being out as a feminist. And, whereas stories posted on #radicalfeminism rely on a recognizable essential body and almost exclusively on theory, those on #transfeminism obliterate the recognizable body to also take up ways of consciousness-raising from the bottom up. On #transfeminism, rockrollfeminist, writes:

It is time to look the monstrous in the eye. It is time. It is time to say that we are beautiful in our fierceness, and that we are our own. We are not the rejected of what we can never be. We are what we were meant to be. We are not pieces of wholes thrown together incorrectly. We are not mistakes.

Given that Tumblr is one of the spaces in which the conflicts between radical feminism and trans women rage on, it is also important to note the historical manifestation of the monstrous as connected with trans women. Radical feminist, [Daly \(1989\)](#) makes the connection explicit in “Boundary Violation and the Frankenstein Phenomenon” in which she writes about trans women as the agents of a “necrophilic invasion” of female space (pp. 69–72). [Raymond \(1979\)](#) also echoes Frankenstein’s feelings toward the monster when she says that “the problem of transsexuality would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence.” It is commonplace in literature to equate Frankenstein’s monster with the author who cannot accept difference in herself. If cis women, particularly lesbians and bisexual women, project experiences of nonconformity onto the Frankenstein, then the monster is perpetually resigned to the margins. Some feminists have mobilized around transforming the center, even if through separatism. Trans feminists, on the other hand, construct narratives of finding agency along the edges. Once again, this assumes an audience who is potentially both queer and normative.

Frankenstein’s power over everyday life, like that of cisnormativity’s power over trans women, is reflected in the body and in the ability to speak about these issues. However, from the margins, rockrollfeminist (above) writes through an empowered, yet imperfect body about trans women’s experiences. On #transfeminism, L.L., also writes:

I am not a woman trapped in a man’s body. This body is no man’s; it is mine, it is me, and there is no man in that equation. And I am not trapped in it. There are a million and one ways out of this body, and I have clung to it, tooth and claw, despite an endless line of people and institutions who would rather I vacate the premises, and have sometimes been willing to make me bleed to convince me they’re right.

This body is mine, and I claim it and its bruises, and it is not a man’s, and I am not trapped here. I have looked leaving my body in the eye and I have said, in the end, hell no. There is too much to do, too much to love, too many who need one more of us to say hell no and help them say the same. It is time for a feminism of the monstrous.

Through these narratives, we see how the coming-out and being-out processes are continuous for those who also identify as feminists. Some feminists are particularly concerned with trans women and the idea of male privilege ([Stryker 2011](#)). This idea posits that trans women are socialized as boys and thus cannot empathize with the experiences of cis girls and women. Trans feminists, however, reject the common response to reject the idea of male privilege, even for trans women. Many trans women have “passed” as men at some point in their lives and may have been privileged during employment, education, or other interactions. Instead, trans feminists reject the “wrong-body model” to focus on the acceptance of a complex gender history as centered on the body. As a result, self-proclaimed trans feminists write about their experiences as complex interactions between the disadvantages of being trans, the oppression felt from living as an adult woman, and their experiences with male privilege. By writing that she is “not trapped in a man’s body,” L.L. begins to construct a narrative of difference through poetic writing for narrative audiences that may also be privileged in some ways,



while oppressed in others. She also turns public and feminist narratives about essentialism on their head as she claims the imperfect body so physically affected by patriarchy in order to disrupt the institution from her position in the margins.

Another way to create interactive conversations on Tumblr is the “Ask Box” function. Each blog has an ask box where users can ask bloggers questions and, if they so choose, remain anonymous. Here, one user answers the anonymous question, “How can a woman have such a protruding adam’s apple?” In response, one #transfeminism blogger writes:

this is where i keep my courage  
i do what few could do  
this is where i keep my song  
a voice that changes hearts  
this is where i keep my strength  
i swallow all your hate  
this is where i keep my love  
a place where lips can rest  
and if my body’s strange to you  
its only cause you lack the joy  
of knowing me like before

If the story of *Frankenstein’s* is about rejection and the fantasy of revenge, then the coming out and being out narratives produced on #transfeminism are about accepting that rejection and turning toward feminism in order to find personal redemption through the body. However, while self-identified radical feminists were declaring a particular sexual identity, storytellers posting on #transfeminism are also telling gender stories through poetic writing. “[I]f my body’s strange to you its only cause you lack the joy of knowing me like before,” then these narratives are also about proclaiming a particular gender history. There is not a clear delineation between being in the closet and coming out or being out and both experiences are valuable in the narrator’s journey toward becoming a feminist, no matter how painful. The feminist journey is just beginning and, for #transfeminism bloggers, it seems that these stories are also about finding emotional acceptance, bodily intimacy, and love for themselves as the world watches.

#### 4. Discussion

Through a concentration on audiences, form, and space, I show how narrative productions of gender, essentialism, and cis- and heteronormativity impact and are challenged by everyday feminist stories about coming out and being out. This research adds to the discussion about how narratives are collectively- and contextually-produced social performances for audiences. In particular, I also show how discursive forms of text are important as storytellers differently take up these narratives using emotions, poetry and/or logic for either separatist or large, diverse and unknown audiences as members attempt to convince, defend, or make claims in attempts to codify their experiences. The importance of poetry in the overall lesbian movement cannot be denied (see the works of Judy Grahn, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, among others). As [Garber \(2012\)](#) noted, poetry invokes the cultural meanings lesbians have produced through lineage, history, and identity. In this way, poetry is a social constructionist project. This discursive form of text also reflects the activist practice of seizing the language and using it as a way to affect narrative productions about gender and sexuality. This study reflects three important findings.

Just as these narratives are not uniform across LGB and T, they remain at the center of feminist work as particular kinds of activism persist online. And, while Salon feminists and Tumblr bloggers are writing in different times and spaces, their stories suggest that it is (trans and cis) women’s lived experiences that coordinates their narratives and centers them within their own communities and within the world-at-large. And, just as self-described radical and trans feminists often find themselves

at odds, this finding suggests that perhaps their consciousness-raising practices have been more similar than we thought. In the feminist tradition, poetry is how they connect the personal with the political. Radical feminism grew largely out of the 1960s civil rights movement and women's dissatisfaction with the "so-called male dominated liberation struggles" (Linden-Ward and Green 1993). Over the years and stemming from their work in other movements, radical feminists developed a distinctive vocabulary to demand social change and to make sense of the way the world is organized that continues online. And, in many ways, self-described trans feminists are growing the work other feminists have done to codify sexism to theorize about trans women's experiences. In this way, the feminist lineage of narrative productions positions these two kinds of feminisms not as ideologically distinct, but as stemming from practices both aimed at opposing and challenging patriarchy.

But, *which* aspects of feminisms have persisted as mobilization moves online? *Womyn's Words* is, in part, defined by its attention to the personal, lived experiences of its members. Woven together with poetry, short stories, and other creative ways of constructing narrative heroines, plots, morals, and spaces, the newsletter reflects how feminists can connect logic and emotions using the everyday. The newsletter took on distinctive characters of Salon feminists' lived work in the context of the social relations of patriarchy. Online, what seems to have survived in #radicalfeminism is the attention to theory. Users take up past narratives, including the heroines and morals of the past to reflect on the political abstractions that seem relevant in logic-centered claims. What seems to be missing is the sense of community. However, these methods of producing narratives by way of political abstractions make sense given that the audiences online are large, diverse, and also very abstract. Bloggers on #transfeminism do take up narratives to address the essential body and to write for audiences with complicated gender histories of their own. This is perhaps because #transfeminism creates narratives from the everyday experiences of women, rather than the top-down academic method popular on #radicalfeminism. Indeed, #transfeminism seems to be for trans women rather than about them, even if the audience is diverse. What is missing, however, is an experiential discussion of race and class. While there is talk of a need to center trans women of color within the hashtag, bloggers do not readily write from these experiences.

Original theories of radical feminism were also marked by a focus on sexuality, specifically in the pursuit of a distinctive practice as produced by and for women (Earles 2019). That is perhaps one of the reasons that radical-lesbian feminists evoked emotion through poetry in the coming-out and being-out process. Poetry expands what we know about producing effective communication and toward whom those emotions can be expressed. In print, Salon feminists also initiated a "Sexuality Web" (WEB 1983) as a way to discuss lesbian sex and to share their experiences in the form of poetry, song, and more. However, this endeavor was short-lived as members concentrated more so on the production of a sexual identity and community rather than on also incorporating ideas and practices about sexual pleasure. As Frye (1983) makes clear, lesbians of the time did not always articulate their desires because patriarchal language cannot account for lesbian love. However, just as Black radical-feminist poets like Audre Lorde wrote about her "flesh that hungers" and the "curve of your waiting body" (Lorde 1970), it is perhaps white-cis-lesbian feminist communities like that of Salon in which women find it difficult to write about sexual acts. So, while early radical feminists achieved a unique sexual identity and community, these narratives did not translate online where "out" lesbians do not often identify themselves. What did persist, however, was a unique radical-feminist identity that depends on how bloggers distinguish themselves from other kinds of feminists through biology and exclusion—a top-down approach that begins with theory. What is lost is the intentional and radical disruption of heteronormativity made possible by poetic consciousness-raising. Ironically, this everyday practice is also what can make feminism *for* women.

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