

# Cancel Culture, the Internet, and Trans Inclusive Feminism

by Liberty Guillamon

*Initially, writing this essay felt incredibly intimidating and it therefore resulted in hours upon hours whiled away simply staring blankly at my computer screen. This was punctuated only by consuming an inordinate amount of caffeine in the hopes that eventually the neurotransmitters in my brain would fire fast enough to form a cohesive and concrete thought on the topic. The issue of transgender inclusive feminism, or the lack thereof, is one that is very close to my heart; I wanted so badly to be a fierce advocate for the advancement of transgender rights. Passion initiated and fuelled my will to write the essay; however, it also made it difficult to stomach the content that was necessary to read in order to understand the fears and concerns of TERFs (self proclaimed or otherwise).*

*This background information is necessary because I have been asked to reflect upon the most meaningful or valuable element of this writing experience. My answer is simply: I finished it. An affliction that I, along with many others, suffer from in the age of social media is an ability to consume and share an abundance of information in a very short amount of time. This is undoubtedly beneficial for many reasons, as is being demonstrated at this very moment with the vital internet advocacy for the Black Lives Matter movement; the internet can be a fierce tool for change. However, when people post or tweet about complex topics, their opinions are shoehorned into a certain format. While one hopes that users diligently do their own research in order to get the “whole story,” this is not guaranteed. Therefore, writing this essay forced me to quell my outrage and to do the hard work of forming a thoroughly researched opinion. I could not simply dismiss a statement that enraged me as irrational, because my essay’s aim was to understand it.*

*Therefore, the most valuable and meaningful part of this process was the realisation that debate and discussion is meaningless if we do not allow ourselves to properly consider the opinions of others, if we make snap judgements based on limited sources.*

—Liberty Guillamon

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It is an elusive feat to remain relevant in an ever-evolving movement such as feminism. In October 2015, Rachael Melhuish, women’s officer at Cardiff University’s student union, started a petition urging the university officials to cancel a lecture by renowned feminist Germaine

Greer (Quinn). This was not because of her capabilities as an academic, but because of her trans-exclusionary opinions.<sup>1</sup> The petition stated that “trans-exclusionary views should have no place in feminism or society. Such attitudes contribute to the high levels of stigma, hatred and violence towards trans people” (qtd in Quinn). Greer was scheduled to speak on the topic of “Women & Power: The Lessons of the 20th Century.” Although Greer did not intend to speak on transgender women at this particular lecture, she has regularly spoken disparagingly on the topic of transgender individuals in the past. Speculating about the reasons behind the petition, Greer countered: “What [the petitioners] are saying is that because I don’t think surgery will turn a man into a woman I should not be allowed to speak anywhere” (qtd in Quinn). This is perhaps one of Greer’s least incendiary statements on the topic, amongst a steady stream of other controversial comments in which she similarly attempts to delegitimize transgender identity. While such statements may be shocking to a twenty-first-century audience, understanding them is crucial if we are to begin to dissect current tensions within the feminist movement.

The tone that characterizes much of Greer’s self-defensive rhetoric suggests her belief that her views surrounding transgender women should not affect her ability to speak on feminist topics. To Greer, the two viewpoints are not connected, and explained, rather dismissively, “I am not even going to talk about the issue that they are on about” (qtd in Quinn). Many students at Cardiff University stood definitively in opposition to Greer’s denial of the connection between female rights and transgender rights, believing instead that Greer’s views surrounding transgender individuals negate her place as a feminist in the twenty-first century. Thus, the call for Greer to be ‘no-platformed,’ a British term “most often used to refer to the rescinding of an invitation to speak at an organised event, typically within university” (O’Keefe 86). Melhuish and others argued that no-platforming was necessary in order to acknowledge the gravity of the situation and to send an uncompromising expression of the importance of trans-inclusivity within feminism. It served as recognition of the difference between the students’ view of the need to actively protect female transgender rights and Greer’s dismissive and antagonistic stance.

This is just one of a plethora of examples in which Greer has been accused of being a TERF, though she has not defined herself as one. The creation of the term “TERF” is attributed to blogger Viv Smythe and is an acronym for “Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist” (Smythe). It is largely applied to those who believe that transgender women are not ‘real women’ because of their biological differences, and to treat them as such would lead to the erosion of women’s rights.<sup>2</sup> In a 1989 article for the *Independent*, Greer described a transgender woman as “it,” deliberately denying her gender identity altogether. Greer gratuitously details her “enormous, knuckly, hairy, be-ringed paw” as implicit evidence of her ‘real’ (male) identity. The transgender woman described was a fan who wanted to thank Greer for her feminist activism: activism that the woman felt she had benefited from. Greer concludes the article by saying that she should have responded to the fan with, “you’re a man. *The Female Eunuch* has done less than nothing for you. *Piss off*” (Greer qtd. in Wynn 00:00:51-00:00:59). It is not an exaggeration to label Greer a TERF, since she does not believe that feminism stands to achieve anything for those who are not born biologically female. Greer and many others remain wedded to the belief that transgender women can only ‘impersonate’ the female sex. This is an inflammatory opinion to those who see transgender women and cisgender women as women.

Conversely, Greer's opinions rely on gender essentialism, the idea that there is a definitive gender binary and that these two genders can be identified at birth via external characteristics, such as genitalia. Increasingly, feminist activists reject this way of thinking as having irrational and easily refutable premises. As a result, there is an ever-growing desire for a more inclusive future within the feminist movement. Feminist doctrines of the 1960s and '70s represented a comparatively narrow range of the female experience. It largely emphasized the white, Western, heteronormative female experience, which feminist theorist Patrice Diquinzo argues "implies that these women's situations, experiences, and perspectives are or should be true of all women" (5). While Diquinzo does not explicitly mention trans women, she does reject "biological determinism," which is "the claim that anatomical and physiological differences . . . determine both the meaning of masculinity and femininity and the appropriately different positions of men and women in society" (2). This notion of biological determinism provides the basis for gender essentialism.

TERF ideas are essentially a continuation of this element of radical second-wave feminism. A modern-day manifestation of this type of thinking can be seen in groups such as RadFem Collective, whose mission statement emphasizes "analys[ing] the structures of power which oppress the female sex" because "women as a biological class are globally oppressed by men as a biological class" ("What is Radical Feminism?"). Feminism of this affiliation does not allow for the idea that someone who is assigned male at birth, even if they identify as otherwise, can be considered a woman. However, twenty-first-century feminism increasingly focuses on a less gender-essentialist definition of "woman." Second-wave feminism and today's (post-feminist, third-wave, fourth-wave?) feminism are, unsurprisingly, different.

Andrea Long Chu describes these historical shifts within feminism in her essay, "The Impossibility of Feminism." Chu posits that successive histories and narratives within feminism have differed "in content, but not in form." She suggests that each new prevailing line of thought comes about because "in all cases, Something Went Wrong in feminism then, and in almost every case, it falls to the feminist now to Make Things Right" (Chu 64). A problem is identified and the movement adapts in order to address it: for instance, the expansion of a more gender-inclusive feminism in reaction to gender essentialism. Hence the existence of various 'waves' succeeding each other, allowing for the movement to maintain a necessary adaptability and a progressive trajectory. Abandoning old focuses is therefore a normal and healthy part of feminist history, as Chu demonstrates. Why, then, does it often occur alongside tension and disputes between the old and the new?

Where change occurs, anger often follows, riddling whatever positive progress that may be gained with an anxiety about what may be lost. There is a common assumption that for someone or something to prosper then another will suffer. This forces us to consistently question: who will stand to benefit from any given change and who will be hurt? If you have ever placed a vote in an election after serious deliberation, then this feeling will be familiar.

This divide breeds an anger within feminism, and between feminists, that is useful in understanding the modern-day TERF war. Amina Wadud's essay "Can One Critique Cancel All Previous Efforts?" provides a more concrete explanation as to why this anger occurs. Wadud

writes about the Qur'an, arguing that while there are aspects of the text that are patriarchal, some feminist critiques only serve to "reify the male gaze" (130). She argues that suggesting we must either "liberate women from every utterance in the Qur'an or . . . throw out the sacred aspect of the text altogether" is unnecessary and ineffective (131-132). Removing the "sacred aspect," of the Qur'an, Wadud asserts, does not acknowledge the nuanced and productive arguments that come about when explaining *why* "six or seven sticky passages" may be problematic (132). Perhaps most concerning, it requires the dismissal of an entire community and assumes the members of said community can "be transformed" and will adapt accordingly (132). Though it is not my intention to equate religious conflict and feminist in-fighting, Wadud's concern that eliminating problematic material dismisses the value of critical discussions as well as entire communities could certainly apply in the controversy over Greer. In a rudimentary way, if we replace the Qur'an with a seminal second wave text such as *The Female Eunuch*, we might consider the ways in which Greer's work has shaped the rhetoric of feminist movement without dismissing it entirely. The discussions within the community it has the potential to produce can only serve to strengthen shared values.

While interpretations may vary widely, feminist texts can nonetheless act as a source of hope and guidance, and can garner a sense of community for all those who study and read them. My mum's copy of *The Female Eunuch* sits pride of place on her bookshelf. It is therefore understandable that when much of second-wave feminism remains relevant yet limited in scope, the perceived efforts to change it or make it more inclusive come with struggle. When you rely so heavily on a certain line of thought in order to protect your rights to the very body you live in, then any attack on this is unsurprisingly unwelcome.

These elements of fear of erasure can be seen within Greer's own commentary. She has been known to frequently express anger about the fact that a man who has "enjoyed the services—the unpaid services of a wife," or the benefits of the patriarchy, can suddenly "decide" to be a woman (qtd in Wahlquist). Greer is not alone in this sentiment. Much of what she condemns mirrors what many TERFs fear: that the existence of transgender individuals erases what it means to be a biological "woman," simultaneously erasing second-wave achievements. Bluntly, it is the belief that transgender-inclusive feminism expunges the hard work of cisgender women by allowing transgender women the best of both worlds—the advantage of the patriarchy and ownership of the female experience. When Greer publicly attacks Caitlyn Jenner, Greer is, in her own albeit deeply problematic way, refusing to adapt, refusing to let go of the status that a biological definition of "woman" has given her (Gayle). Insisting that she be non-platformed removes critical debate aimed at changing her bias. It might also indirectly dismiss some second-wave feminists whose views are unrelated to TERF bias. That feminism has moved on, as Chu posits, is natural. However, negotiating with those that are not prepared to change may seem an unproductive pursuit. If Chu is right in her assertion that this friction is not a new concept within the feminist movement, then it would seem reasonable to assume that eventually differences will be overcome. Surely different feminist thoughts in the twenty-first century are not uniquely irreconcilable; surely not all second-wave feminist texts are deliberately trans-exclusionary, nor are all transgender activists today unwilling to recognize the contributions of feminists in the 1960s and 70s. If this is the case, then why does the current climate feel unprecedentedly competitive?

In his paper “The Atavism of Cancel Culture,” Robert Henderson describes a perfect storm that is created by social media—a storm that helps us to understand why this ‘title’ is so unattainable. He points out that though the concept of and the desire behind cancelling someone is not new, the way it is enacted via social media is (Henderson). To illustrate this, Henderson describes a recent event in which Erika Christakis, a member of staff at Yale University, was accused of supporting cultural appropriation. The accusations came about because she questioned the Yale administration’s Halloween costume guidelines, encouraging students to express discomfort with one another’s costumes, rather than placing certain costumes off-limits. Students claimed that her email was an “emblem of systemic racism within the university”—“emblem” here being the operative word to encapsulate the nature of cancel culture: that one action can symbolize an entire person’s being, or even an entire ideology (Henderson).<sup>3</sup> This action can then be used as a reason to unfollow, no-platform, or defame an individual—to ‘cancel’ their relevance and their esteem. Henderson argues that cancelling “has become an entertaining hobby—an indulgent, dopamine-feeding activity practiced on social media” in order to find “who is loyal to their movement.” Henderson’s focus is not on cancel culture within the sphere of gender debate, but his holistic approach is easily applied to the TERF war. Cancel culture of all types, TERF-related or not, allows people to join together against those that they see as the enemy, or as the symbolic manifestation of a greater enemy.

Henderson acknowledges that the desire for connectivity and belonging that cancel culture provides is not a new craving, but asserts that social media platforms such as Twitter encourage people to pursue a dogmatic diatribe that silences those whose opinions do not fit with their own. It would be a severe misstep to underestimate the Internet’s power. Not-so-social media applications allow users to seek out those that are “loyal”: those who support and condone their already established opinions. The inherent danger of this is that total loyalty demands the dismissal, or ‘cancelling,’ of those who challenge one’s opinion. This is when progress begins to stagnate. It must be noted that the definition of ‘progress’ will inevitably vary greatly from person to person and many will perceive what constitutes progress within a movement as regression in disguise.<sup>4</sup> By using the phrase “regression in disguise,” I am referring to a specific tension that occurs when a social movement re-negotiates itself. Thus the danger of social media sites such as Twitter lies in its exacerbation, rather than its creation, of divides. The Internet allows people to disconnect rather than discuss, to cancel rather than converse.

The consequences of the ability to unfollow, mute, and even block one another are far-reaching. Far from being solely evident online, these actions erode virtual borders and infiltrate the physical world. An example that encapsulates the power of the Internet can be seen in the run up to the 2016 election, and the subsequent utilization of forums such as Reddit and Twitter to capitalize on the support of online communities.<sup>5</sup> The increased use of social media has therefore allowed groups to champion their figureheads, providing them with unconditional support and simply cancelling those that disagree. While it has since been removed, the Reddit forum dedicated to supporting President Trump, named r/The\_Donald, included a “deport” button (Alba). While all Reddit pages include a “report” button that allows users to flag offensive posts, those that were “deported” were, unsurprisingly, those that dared to question the divine status that the r/The\_Donald affords to President Trump. This element of online culture creates an enforced and systemic need to reject, wholesale, any differing opinions—and it is not restricted to right wing sycophants. A similar lack of tolerance is mimicked in real life, and it is difficult to

suggest that the Internet has played no part in this process. Similarly, the existence of online petitions such as the one that sought to block Greer from giving a lecture at Cardiff University, amongst a plethora of other examples, suggest that posting on social media platforms has become far more than just an “entertaining hobby.”

If we are to take the impact of the Internet seriously, then it is easy to see how cancel culture exacerbates the conditions that Wadud set out for us. Natalie Wynn, creator of the popular Youtube channel ContraPoints, published a video in March of 2019 entitled, “Gender Critical” in which she analyzes the debate surrounding gender identity politics. Her point of view, as a transgender woman, is one of personal experience but it is also combined with an acknowledgement of a historical timeline much like the one Andrea Long Chu describes. After soliciting stories from “people who used to be gender critical feminists” on Twitter, Wynn discovered that many were women who “found comfort in a rigid view of gender where women and men are completely separate species, where women are safe and men are dangerous” (Wynn 00:02:47-00:02:51). This TERF-promoted definition actively chooses to ignore many transgender individuals and their identities and therefore tensions naturally arise. She likens engaging with the opposition to be akin to eating a “bowl of thumbtacks” (Wynn 00:06:05-00:06:06). This sharply apt description encompasses the struggle that comes with speaking to those that are often not looking for *real* debate, those who instead choose to argue, undermine, and bully others without any authentic desire for resolution.

Given the amount of vitriol present in many online exchanges, it seems that the success of a social movement relies upon its ability to destroy the relevance of ‘Problematic Individuals.’ Chu’s theory of feminism’s reactionary and evolutionary nature is complicated by social media. There is no longer any need for the movement to move forward in a linear fashion with a succession of waves, which is perhaps one reason for confusion surrounding which wave we are currently in. Rather, as Henderson highlights, the Internet allows people to simply cancel, unfollow, block and silence those that they do not agree with. As Wadud notes, when a text or an individual is removed from the conversation, the chance for productive reconciliation is also removed.

Such ideological conflicts are not easily resolved, and it may be naïve to assume that if we all simply talk and listen to one another that conditions will dramatically improve. Part of the anger that social media generates is a result of its giving a voice to those who have not previously had access to one. However, petitioning Cardiff University to cancel Greer’s event may have just simply handed her a megaphone to further martyr herself. On the day of her lecture, a small group gathered to protest. Greer admitted that her rhetoric had been harsh, but she remained unrepentant: “I do agree that calling people names may add to their misery but it happens to old women every day” (qtd in Morris). In a single statement, Greer dismissed the views of the students and cast *them* as cruel, at least in the eyes of those who support her. This is not to suggest that future online protests are doomed, or that we should treat bigots with kindness. Rather, it is a plea to expand beyond the 280-character limit into a nuanced and clarifying debate. It is, after all, not possible to heal what is not acknowledged.

(1) Greer is most famous for her book, *The Female Eunuch*, which launched the second wave of the feminist movement.

(2) See “Woman billboard removed after transphobia row” from *BBC News* for an example of this argument: Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull’s famously controversial billboard featured a Google dictionary definition of “woman”—an “adult human female”—a definition often cited by those that wish for trans women to be excluded from female rights campaigns on the premise that they, by definition, are not entitled to them. The billboard was later removed.

(3) The cancelling of entire belief systems is, unfortunately, a whole other paper, one that already partially exists in the form of Christian Fuchs’s “Herbert Marcuse and Social Media,” in which the social bonds of social media are dissected as forces to reinforce or dismantle ideology (capitalism, for example).

(4) See: “Is the Current Wave of Feminism Losing Supporters Due to Polarisation?” by Sophie White for an apt description of feminism in-fighting. White likens contemporary feminism to a “many-headed hydra” because “as we slay each tenet of the oppressive, misogynist status quo another immediately grows to take its place.” This leads to an abundance of issues with an abundance of potential solutions and the literal impossible task of knowing which is most valid.

(5) Woods and Hahner in *Make America Meme Again* analyze the Internet and make a compelling argument for a more serious discussion of its power.

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