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being, fxminist

Aly Gourd

Western Washington University

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being, fxminist

Aly Gourd, Western Washington University

Abstract

This presentation explores various expressions of voice, arguing the importance of defining and implementing a feminist [fxminist] perspective to inform a cultural shift in how we work to communicate truthfully, resist fear and violent oppressive systems, and find hope. A variation of the following was presented as a capstone presentation in March 2017 and has been reconstructed to reflect aspects of the speech and activities as well as an analytical orientation to the capstone.

Keywords: environmental education, podcast, identity, transformative learning, feminism

The following presentation is intended to honor and make space for voices. Constructing a setting that encourages the seeing and hearing of others is central to the following lesson and speech. Rather than placing the speaker behind a podium at the front of the room, an orientation that separates and insinuates power over other voices, a circle ensures that every person in the room is oriented towards one another, open to listening and cycling through ideas and thinking.

WOMXN

When I speak of womxn, I speak of all people who identify as women.

The intention behind changing the spelling of this word is to acknowledge those who are at times marginalized within the language of gender and the binary that it suggests. It is a call to consider the language we assign to beings on earth and the ways in which language can empower or marginalize voices. Replacing the X in women considers a change in how we represent and understand womxn. A wo-man is not a derivative of a man but a human being defined by a spectrum of human qualities. The perceived binary that exists in Westernized culture between men and women sets up barriers through categorization – it insinuates that to be viewed as a human, one must identify as a man or woman and adhere to certain qualities that are predetermined by a person's biological sex. By utilizing language that categorizes and fails to recognize those who exist outside of the binary, our language fails to recognize certain diverse qualities that represent human beings. Our society of binary: either/or, black or white, good or bad, girl or boy, sets us up to work within a competitive, comparative culture, rather than a culture of compassionate collaboration and one that values diversity of life.



VOICE

Take a moment to think of womxn who have made an impact on your life. With your voice, I invite you to speak and bring the names of these womxn into this space. It is okay if names overlap, but consider the dispersal of voices, making space available for others to use their voice too.

[Click here to hear the names spoken during the capstone presentation](#)

The purpose of hearing the names of womxn who have influenced your life is to recognize the many womxn who have shaped this present space, with their voices and their being.

You have each been given a colorful card and a writing utensil. Using the card you have been given, please write one quality that describes this person. Please write as boldly as you can, to fill up the card. Once you have done this, you can hold your card with the word facing out in your hand. As you are able, we will begin to my left and hear from each person around the circle. With each person using their voice, we will say the word we have written until everyone has spoken their word.

[Click here to hear the inspirational words that describes these people](#)

Thank you again for sharing. I invite you to keep your words in mind as we continue.

FXMINIST

I identify as a fxminist. Although, to me this word requires further explanation. According to popular misconceptions, a *feminist* is someone who wishes for power over men and is committed to attacking their place in society. To me, and many others, this does not accurately describe the purpose and need for fxminism.

Feminist writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie considers the word feminist:

Some people ask 'Why the word feminist? Why not just say you are a believer in human rights, or something like that?' Because that would be dishonest. Feminism is, of course, part of human rights in general – but to choose to use the vague expression human rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem was not about being human, but specifically about being a female human. For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group. It is only fair that the solution to the problem should acknowledge that (Adichie, 2012, p.41).

The word *feminist* continues to evolve within the contexts of our culture, our learning and our history. This work requires that we continuously choose to engage in listening and learning to best evolve this work to reflect a more just society. We must reclaim fxminism (Adichie, 2012).

I identify as a fxminist of privilege. My privilege has supported me in making choices that have led me to where I am today. My beliefs and expression of identity have been influenced by my environment, an environment that exists in a dominating culture that discriminates against others based on the color of their skin, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, documentation status and other characteristics that make up human identity. I want to recognize that my experience in a dominating culture as a white cis-gendered female is very different than those who experience marginalization due to multiple discriminations towards characteristics and systematic oppressions of identity.

I have chosen to speak about fxminism because of the ways that I have perceived and experienced marginalization based on gender and because I believe fxminists hold power and have the responsibility to act in response to the marginalization of people and the environment.

The purpose of *feminist movement* has been to reveal and take action to change societal structures of domination over marginalized people. *Feminist movement* has a history of exclusivity – exclusivity to people of color, to those who identify as men, and to people who do not ascribe to the assumed definition of *feminism*. During the Women's Rights Movement in the 1970s, black women were disempowered by white women when asked to march in the back instead of collaboratively lead from the front. By segregating the Women's Rights Movement and disempowering women of color to be involved in the movement, *feminism* has exemplified a failure to act against domination and discrimination (hooks, 2013).

To explain the way in which a movement could be both oppressive and liberating, Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the term of intersectionality in the context of *feminism*. Crenshaw explains:

Unable to grasp the importance of Black women's intersectional experiences, not only courts, but feminist and civil rights thinkers as well have treated Black women in ways that deny both the unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and Blacks (Crenshaw, 1981, p.150).

Gender is part of identity, but when a movement, such as the feminist movement, centralizes white cis-gendered women and fails to recognize other forms of domination towards qualities of identity such as race, sexual preference, religion, ethnicity, the feminist movement fails to act against domination. When a person contains multiple connections among identity characteristics, this is called intersectionality. Feminism needs to continuously evolve to reflect awareness of intersectionality to comprehensively

combat dominating forces and oppressive structures in Western society (Crenshaw, 1981).

FEMININE

The word *feminist* originates from the word *feminine*.

Webster's dictionary defines "feminine" as: "Feminine: of, relating to, or marked by qualities traditionally associated with women" (Websters, 2017).

Synonyms for the word feminine include: *female, womanish, womanlike, womanly and related words include: girlish, effeminate, effete, epicene, sissified, sissy, unmanly, ladylike, distaff, petticoat, ultrafeminine*

Near antonyms include the words *masculine, macho, manlike*

The word feminine exists to describe the characteristics held and exhibited by women. Does the definition recognize the importance of femininity as a necessary characteristic of being? By understanding feminine as the opposite of masculine, a binary suggests that we must be either masculine or feminine and that we cannot exist as both. If the English language relies on the word feminine to describe the qualities that women hold and views these as the opposite of masculine, feminine words are viewed as ways to emasculate men. We assume as a culture that to exhibit masculine qualities is to exhibit the most admirable qualities and that to be feminine is to be less.

The qualities that you have contributed to describe womxn in your life do not exist in a binary. Your words are not attributed to the physical look of a person that therefore automatically portray them as a woman. Any human being has the potential to exhibit these admirable qualities (such as the qualities you have voiced) like compassionate, loving, strong, tenacious, passionate. The binary assumes a need for comparison and competition. Rather than masculine and feminine characteristics fitting together within a human being, masculine and feminine qualities are viewed to contradict one another and one is viewed to dominate the qualities of the other.

Leadership is often associated with masculine qualities such as being assertive, competitive, confident, rational, and loud. Without these qualities one cannot be viewed as a leader.

As a person who is often identified as "quiet" it might not always be clear that I have the capacity to lead based on Western perceptions of leadership. I also identify as an introvert. Quietness and introversion have in common that I prefer to process information and to recuperate in quieter, less stimulating spaces. Introversion does not necessarily reflect disengagement, passiveness or a lack of ability to lead or utilize my

voice. Instead, the difference between extroversion and introversion is the level of stimulation that I tend to prefer as I learn, lead, and interact with the world (Cain, 2012).

I have found my voice in leadership through teaching. I teach to inspire the creativity and voice of each student through compassionate listening and guidance. The utilization of my voice is intended to inspire students to share their individual gifts to care for themselves, care for other people, and care for the natural world. Being comfortable in my quietness has given me the confidence to see myself as a leader and to share the creativity that is part of my authentic and true self. As bell hooks explains,

Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world (bell hooks, 2003, p.23).

To support others in expressing their gifts we need to look outside of the binary. We tend to view introversion and extroversion as a binary, however these qualities exist on a spectrum where nobody can be purely introvert or purely extrovert -- just as nobody can be purely *masculine* or purely *feminine*. The language we utilize to categorize characteristics of people within a binary of good or bad perpetuates domination over those that exhibit different forms of leadership and qualities that go against the popular narrative. If the language surrounding the word *feminine* explains the word to be inferior to *masculine*, the word as we understand it fails to encompass the strength and our need as a society to listen to the voices of womxn.

Language is an expression of human creativity and exists in constant change. When the understood definition of *feminine* does not empower womxn but allows and engages masculine qualities as more powerful qualities in society, womxn begin to internalize stereotypes and stereotypes become the reality in which we engage with the world.

Vandana Shiva, environmental activist, fxminist, and ecologist from India understands gender ideology as a language that can perpetuate how we view men and womxn in society. Shiva explains:

Gender ideology has created the dualism and disjunction between male and female. Simultaneously it has created a conjunction of activity and creativity with violence and the masculine, and a conjunction of passivity with nonviolence and the feminine" (Shiva, 2016, p.52).

If society categorizes womxn as passive beings and men as violent, these stereotypes are perpetuated and these stereotypes become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

aranya samskriti, Culture of the Forest

Vandana Shiva also explains "organizational principles guiding Indian civilization" known as *aranya samskriti*, which roughly translates to culture of the forest (p.55). Vandana calls for a shift in societal framework as *Aranyani*: the forest as the *fxminine* principle (Shiva, 2016, p. 55).

To exhibit a culture of the forest that reflects the *fxminine* principle is to engage in work that exhibits a culture that is life-giving rather than life-reducing (Shiva, 2016). If as a society we choose to embrace the *fxminine* principle, we choose to enhance life rather than dominate life.

The *culture of the forest* that I often experience is often different than one that follows the *fxminine principle*. As a person who chooses to spend time in the mountains, rivers, forests and on rocks, I have noticed that certain qualities are assumed to be needed when spending time outside.

Dominating language and behavior permeate the popular narrative of *outdoor culture* – and it is assumed that to participate in activities outdoors or to be in a place outside, one must portray oneself in a specific way to feel that one belongs in outdoor spaces. In the popular narrative of *outdoor culture*, it is often assumed that strength can only be found in the form of physicality and an ability to subdue and compete with other beings in the natural world is vital for participation in outdoor spaces. *Outdoor culture* perpetuates a requirement of privilege – white skin, fully-abled, economically wealthy.

Survival and interaction in the outdoors, though, is not about dominating a place. Instead it is about finding methods of sustaining life in a place. It is about understanding your place and cultivating a relationship with place rather than exhibiting power-over place.

Through exhibiting a power with place we make a conscious choice to exhibit a culture of the forest which is rooted in the *fxminine* principle and a need for a reflection of *fxminine* qualities that are life-giving rather than life-reducing. Applying the *fxminine* principle is a commitment to creativity and a conscious choice to make room for the creativity of all beings (Shiva, 2016).

ACTION AS COMPASSION

Engaging in action towards a more fair and just society is challenging to sustain when the number of injustices can overwhelm and incite paralysis towards action. Fear can also be perpetuated to instigate "othering" and discrimination of others.

Headlines in the past six months have included:

(High Country News)

- “EPA cuts will hit minority communities the hardest”
- “Trump gets to replace judge who rejected his travel ban”
- “EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt claims carbon dioxide does not contribute to climate change”

(NPR)

- “ICE detains alleged victim of abuse at Texas courthouse”
- “Black Muslims face double jeopardy, Anxiety in the Heartland”
- “Trump Vows to End 'Sanctuary Cities'”
- “Republicans vote to silence Elizabeth Warren”

(NY times)

- “Trump's Immigration ban: who is barred and who is not”
- “Republican Health Coverage Could End Insurance Coverage to Abortion”
- “1 more woman accuses Trump of inappropriate sexual conduct. Here's the full list”
- “Highlights from the Betsy Devos Hearing: school vouchers, oligarchy, and Grizzlies”
- “Trump's travel ban, aimed at terrorists, has blocked doctors”
- “Wealthy would get billions in taxcuts under Obamacare repeal”

If we look a little closer at a few of these headlines, we can notice how destructive, and life-reducing simplification and binary thinking can be.

Headline: “Trump's Immigration ban: who is barred and who is not” (nytimes, 2017):

When people, such as undocumented immigrants, Muslims, refugees, are spoken of by leaders as “others” or “illegal”, the understanding of groups of people is generalized and dehumanized. Policies are shaped so that society no longer views immigrants, Muslims, refugees, as people who deserve to exercise basic human rights, but as something to be feared.

Headline: “Trump's travel ban, aimed at terrorists, has blocked doctors” (nytimes, 2017):

The Travel ban is a reflection of othering and inciting fear based on the actions of individuals. It is a simplification of a group of people in an attempt to control what we do not understand.

Headline: “Republican Health Coverage Could End Insurance Coverage to Abortion” (nytimes, 2017).

Before the Affordable Care Act, womxn's health care was more expensive than men's health care. Insurance companies have been allowed to discriminate against and make profits from womxn who require care such as maternity care, contraception, and specific womxn's health screenings and procedures.

With the new implementation of the current proposed health care plan, those on Medicaid would not be able to utilize credits to receive any form of health care at Planned Parenthood. In 2015, Planned Parenthood provided affordable care to approximately 2.5 million people, mainly womxn. Many who rely on Planned Parenthood for medical care also reflect a population that uses Medicaid to pay for health services. 43 percent, which represents \$53 million in revenue of Planned Parenthood funding relies on tax credits from serving those on Medicaid. Essentially the new health care bill seeks to defund Planned Parenthood. The attack on Planned Parenthood is an attack on affordable access to womxn's healthcare and safety and a reduction of the choice and power that womxn can make about their own healthcare and wellbeing.

These headlines that explain the actions of our leaders do not display actions that are life giving but instead life reducing. Life reducing actions can prevent us from finding hope. A loss of hope can turn to fear and without hope, we may allow fear to take over. We create binaries to simplify and simplification in a diverse world turns to assumption which turns to fear and blame. We begin to fear what we do not know.

As bell hooks explains:

A profound cynicism is at the core of dominator culture wherever it prevails in the world. At this time in our lives, citizens all around the world feel touched by death-dealing cynicism that normalizes violence, that makes war and tells us that peace is not possible, that it can especially not be realized among those who are different, who do not look or sound alike, who do not eat the same food, worship the same gods, or speak the same language" (2003, p.11).

Cynicism leads to inaction and we soon listen only to the fear circulating in our minds rather than engaging in seeing what is actually present. Although facing the present can be painful, disengagement is a reflection of domination over others who suffer in a society that allows for those of privilege to disengage.

If constant engagement can cause exhaustion and incite hopelessness, how then can we find hope and continue to be present?

When we engage in activities that help us see the power we hold as life-giving beings, we can generate hope in times where it feels difficult to muster. To generate hope is to see the gifts and beauty that each of us bring to the world. To take action is to share the beauty that we hold and see. The transference of beauty can take on many forms; Scientific research, poetry, sculpture, movement, speech – these forms can all take shape as engagement to generate hope and action towards a more peaceful world.

An expression of creativity is a communication of identity. It comes from the heart. What language then can we choose to speak and engage in that encourages diverse perspectives to be heard? How can we as a culture begin to listen to other beings rather than compare and fear what is different?

As Terry Tempest Williams shares in her book, *When Women were Birds*, "Finding one's voice is a process of finding one's passion" (2012, pp. 85). The passions we engage with and share with the world are expressions of our individual gifts and the collective power we hold when we work together. One way of communicating is the process of non-violent or compassionate communication. Non-violent communication is a way of communicating needs based on observation not judgment. While at first this may feel scripted, it is also a way of communicating directly.

Again, I will ask for your participation in engaging in compassionate communication in action in an effort to share each individual voice through writing. On the other side of your card please take the next few minutes to write a poem, a political note, a request to your senator using the language steps of nonviolent communication.

- -I observe, I notice, I see...
- -I feel...
- -I need as a constituent...
- -I request...

You will have five minutes to write your request. Above you will see a list of your senators. Keep in mind some of the issues we spoke of earlier or if you wish to write to another topic, feel free.

BEING: FXMINIST

To be a fxminist is to find strength in diversity of life and to embrace the qualities that reflect life-enhancing action. All people have the power to reflect the qualities of leadership that we need in order heal the Earth and ensure justice in our world. One path towards justice is embracing fxminism. Here we have an opportunity to redefine, reclaim, and evolve our fxminist identity for ourselves and find ways to express and convey what it means to be a fxminist. The action you have chosen to take place in today, is one form of action that I believe aligns with the fxminine principle.

As you finish your requests to your senators, you have an opportunity to mail these requests and engage in one form of what I consider fxminist action. If you wish to mail your request, please place your card in the provided envelope and write the name of your senator on the front.

FXMINISTS:

I first had the idea to engage in this activity based on a quote I read in the book "Unspoken Hunger" by Terry Tempest Williams.

As women [FXMINISTS] wedded to wilderness, we must realize that we do carry the wild card, that our individual voices matter and our collective voice can shatter the status quo that for too long has been legislated on behalf of power and far too little on behalf of life. We can flood Congress with our wild cards (imagine hundreds of thousands of brightly colored cards covering the desks of our representatives), demanding that women's [womxn's] issues be recognized as health issues, as environmental issues, as issues centered around a quality of life that touches all of us, deeply. This is the kind of politics we must engage in - - nothing marginal, nothing peripheral, nothing inessential, not anymore" (Williams, 1995).

Living presently and engaging in action allows us to be in our human-ness and understand the power we possess in evolving our language and actions towards justice. Thank you for listening, using your voice, and working with me in being fxminist.

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