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# THE TRANSFEMINIST MANIFESTO

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## Introduction

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented broadening of American feminist movement as a result of the participation of diverse groups of women. When a group of women who had previously been marginalized within the mainstream of the feminist movement broke their silence, demanding their rightful place within it, they were first accused of fragmenting feminism with trivial matters, and then were eventually accepted and welcomed as a valuable part of the feminist thought. We have become increasingly aware that the diversity is our strength, not weakness. No temporary fragmentation or polarization is too severe to nullify the ultimate virtues of inclusive coalition politics.

Every time a group of women previously silenced begins to speak out, other feminists are challenged to rethink their idea of whom they represent and what they stand for. While this process sometimes leads to a painful realization of our own biases and internalized oppressions as feminists, it eventually benefits the movement by widening our perspectives and constituency. It is under this understanding that we declare that the time has come for trans women to openly take part in the feminist revolution, further expanding the scope of the movement.

"Trans" is often used as an inclusive term encompassing a wide range of gender norm violations that involve some discontinuity between one's sex assigned at birth to her or his gender identity and/or expression. For the purpose of this manifesto, however, the phrase "trans women" is at times used to refer to those individuals who identify, present or live more or less as women despite their birth sex assignment to the contrary. "Trans men," likewise, is used to describe those who identify, present, or live as men despite the fact that they were perceived otherwise at birth. While this operational definition leaves out many trans people who do not conform to the male/female dichotomy or those who are transgendered in other ways, it is our hope that they will recognize enough similarities between issues that we all face and find our analysis somewhat useful in their own struggles as well.

*Transfeminism* is primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. It is also open to other queers, intersex people, trans men, non-trans women, non-trans men and others who are sympathetic toward needs of trans

women and consider their alliance with trans women to be essential for their own liberation. Historically, trans men have made greater contribution to feminism than trans women. We believe that it is imperative that more trans women start participating in the feminist movement alongside others for our liberation.

*Transfeminism* is not about taking over existing feminist institutions. Instead, it extends and advances feminism as a whole through our own liberation and coalition work with all others. It stands up for trans and non-trans women alike, and asks non-trans women to stand up for trans women in return. *Transfeminism* embodies feminist coalition politics in which women from different backgrounds stand up for each other, because if we do not stand for each other, nobody will.

## Primary Principles

Primary principles of *transfeminism* are simple. First, it is our belief that each individual has the right to define her or his own identities and to expect society to respect them. This also includes the right to express our gender without fear of discrimination or violence. Second, we hold that we have the sole right to make decisions regarding our own bodies, and that no political, medical or religious authority shall violate the integrity of our bodies against our will or impede our decisions regarding what we do with them.

However, no one is completely free from the existing social and cultural dynamics of the institutionalized gender system. When we make any decisions regarding our gender identity or expression, we cannot escape the fact that we do so in the context of the patriarchal binary gender system. Trans women in particular are encouraged and sometimes required to adopt the traditional definition of femininity in order to be accepted and legitimized by the medical community, which has appointed itself as the arbiter of who is genuinely woman enough and who is not. Trans women often find themselves having to “prove” their womanhood by internalizing gender stereotypes in order to be acknowledged as women or to receive hormonal and surgical interventions. This practice is oppressive to trans and non-trans women alike, as it denies uniqueness of each woman.

*Transfeminism* holds that nobody shall be coerced into or out of personal decisions regarding her or his gender identity or expression in order to be a “real” woman or a “real” man. We also believe that nobody should be coerced into or out of these personal decisions in order to qualify as a “real” feminist.

As trans women, we have learned that our safety is often dependent on how well we can “pass” as “normal” women; as transfeminists, we find ourselves constantly having to negotiate our need for safety and comfort against our feminist principles. *Transfeminism* challenges all women, including trans women, to examine how we all internalize heterosexist and patriarchal mandates of genders and what global implications our actions entail; at the same time, we make it clear that it is not the responsibility of a feminist to rid herself of every resemblance to the patriarchal definition of femininity. Women should not be accused of reinforcing gender stereotypes for making personal decisions, even if these decisions appear to comply with certain gender roles; such a purity test is disempowering to women because it denies our agency, and it will only alienate a majority of women, trans or not, from taking part in the feminist movement.

*Transfeminism* believes in the notion that there are as many ways of being a woman as there are women, that we should be free to make our own decisions without guilt. To this end, *transfeminism* confronts social and political institutions that inhibit or narrow our individual choices, while refusing to blame individual women for making whatever personal decisions. It is unnecessary -- in fact *oppressive* -- to require women to abandon their freedom to make personal choices to be considered a true feminist, for it will only replace the rigid patriarchal construct of ideal femininity with a slightly modified feminist version that is just as rigid. *Transfeminism* believes in fostering an environment where women's individual choices are honored, while scrutinizing and challenging institutions that limit the range of choices available to them.

## **The Question of Male Privilege**

Some feminists, particularly radical lesbian feminists, have accused trans women and men of benefiting from male privilege. Male-to-female transsexuals, they argue, are socialized as boys and thus given male privilege; female-to-male transsexuals on the other hand are characterized as traitors who have abandoned their sisters in a pathetic attempt to acquire male privilege. *Transfeminism* must respond to this criticism, because it has been used to justify discrimination against trans women and men within some feminist circles.

When confronted with such an argument, a natural initial response of trans women is to deny ever having any male privilege whatsoever in their lives. It is easy to see how they would come to believe that being born male was more of a burden than a privilege: many of them despised having male bodies and being treated as boys as they grew up. They recall how uncomfortable it felt to be pressured to act tough and manly. Many have experienced bullying and ridicule by other boys because they did not act appropriately as boys. They were made to feel ashamed, and frequently suffered from depression. Even as adults, they live with the constant fear of exposure, which would jeopardize their employment, family relationships, friendships and safety.

However, as *transfeminists*, we must resist such a simplistic reaction. While it is true that male privilege affects some men far more than others, it is hard to imagine that trans women born as males never benefited from it. Most trans women have "passed" as men (albeit as "sissy" ones) at least some point in their lives, and were thus given preferable treatments in education and employment, for example, whether or not they enjoyed being perceived as men. They have been trained to be assertive and confident, and some trans women manage to maintain these "masculine" traits, often to their advantage, after transitioning.

What is happening here is that we often confuse the oppression we have experienced for being gender-deviant with the absence of the male privilege. Instead of claiming that we have never benefited from male supremacy, we need to assert that our experiences represent a dynamic interaction between male privilege and the disadvantage of being trans.

Any person who has a gender identity and/or an inclination toward a gender expression that match the sex attributed to her or him has a privilege of being non-trans. This privilege, like other privileges, is invisible to those who possess it. And like all other privileges, those who lack the privilege intuitively know

how severely they suffer due to its absence. A trans woman may have limited access to male privilege depending on how early she transitioned and how fully she lives as a woman, but at the same time she experiences vast emotional, social, and financial disadvantages for being trans. The suggestion that trans women are inherently more privileged than other women is as ignorant as claiming that gay male couples are more privileged than heterosexual couples because both partners have male privilege.

Tensions often arise when trans women attempt to access “women’s spaces” that are supposedly designed to be safe havens from the patriarchy. The origin of these “women's spaces” can be traced back to the early lesbian feminism of the 1970s, which consisted mostly of white middle-class women who prioritized sexism as the most fundamental social inequality while largely disregarding their own role in perpetuating other oppressions such as racism and classism. Under the assumption that sexism marked women’s lives far more significantly than any other social elements, they assumed that their experience of sexism is universal to all women regardless of ethnicity, class, etc. – meaning, all non-trans women. Recent critiques of the 1970s radical feminism point out how their convenient negligence of racism and classism in effect privileged themselves as white middle-class women.

Based on this understanding, *transfeminists* should not respond to the accusation of male privilege with denial. We should have the courage to acknowledge ways in which trans women may have benefited from male privilege – some more than others, obviously – just like those of us who are white should address white privilege. *Transfeminism* believes in the importance of honoring our differences as well as similarities because women come from variety of backgrounds. *Transfeminists* confront our own privileges, and expect non-trans women to acknowledge their privilege of being non-trans as well.

By acknowledging and addressing our privileges, trans women can hope to build alliances with other groups of women who have traditionally been neglected and deemed “unladylike” by white middle-class standard of womanhood. When we are called deviant and attacked just for being ourselves, there is nothing to gain from avoiding the question of privilege.

## **Deconstructing the Reverse Essentialism**

While the second wave of feminism popularized the idea that one's gender is distinct from her or his physiological sex and is socially and culturally constructed, it largely left unquestioned the belief that there was such a thing as true physical sex. The separation of gender from sex was a powerful rhetoric used to break down compulsory gender roles, but allowed feminists to question only half of the problem, leaving the naturalness of essential female and male sexes until recently.

*Transfeminism* holds that sex and gender are both socially constructed; furthermore, the distinction between sex and gender is artificially drawn as a matter of convenience. While the concept of gender as a social construct has proven to be a powerful tool in dismantling traditional attitudes toward women's capabilities, it left room for one to justify certain discriminatory policies or structures as having a biological basis. It also failed to address the realities of trans experiences in which physical sex is felt more artificial and changeable than their inner sense of who they are.

Social construction of biological sex is more than an abstract observation: it is a physical reality that many intersex people go through. Because society makes no provision for the existence of people

whose anatomical characteristics do not neatly fit into male or female, they are routinely mutilated by medical professionals and manipulated into living as their assigned sex. Intersex people are usually not given an opportunity to decide for themselves how they wish to live and whether or not they want surgical or hormonal “correction.” Many intersex people find it appalling that they had no say in such a major life decision, whether or not their gender identity happens to match their assigned sex. We believe that genital mutilation of intersex children is inherently abusive because it unnecessarily violates the integrity of their bodies without proper consent. The issue is not even whether or not the sex one was assigned matches her or his gender identity; it is whether or not intersex people are given real choice over what happens to their bodies.

Trans people feel dissatisfied with the sex assigned to them without their consent according to the simplistic medical standard. Trans people are diverse: some identify and live as members of the sex different from what was assigned to them by medical authorities, either with or without medical intervention, while others identify with neither or both of male and female sexes. Trans liberation is about taking back the right to define ourselves from medical, religious and political authorities. *Transfeminism* views any method of assigning sex to be socially and politically constructed, and advocates a social arrangement where one is free to assign her or his own sex (or non-sex, for that matter).

As trans people begin to organize politically, it is tempting to adopt the essentialist notion of gender identity. The cliché popularized by the mass media is that trans people are "women trapped in men's bodies" or vice versa. The attractiveness of such a strategy is clear, as the general population is more likely to become supportive of us if we could convince them that we are somehow born with a biological error over which we have no control over it. It is also often in tune with our own sense of who we are, which feels very deep and fundamental to us. However, as *transfeminists*, we resist such temptations because of their implications.

Trans people have often been described as those whose physical sex does not match the gender of their mind or soul. This explanation might make sense intuitively, but it is nonetheless problematic for *transfeminism*. To say that one has a female mind or soul would mean there are male and female minds that are different from each other in some identifiable way, which in turn may be used to justify discrimination against women. Essentializing our gender identity can be just as dangerous as resorting to biological essentialism.

*Transfeminism* believes that we construct our own gender identities based on what feels genuine, comfortable and sincere to us as we live and relate to others within given social and cultural constraint. This holds true for those whose gender identity is in congruence with their birth sex, as well as for trans people. Our demand for recognition and respect shall in no way be weakened by this acknowledgement. Instead of justifying our existence through the reverse essentialism, *transfeminism* dismantles the essentialist assumption of the normativity of the sex/gender congruence.

## **Body Image/Consciousness as a Feminist Issue**

We as feminists would like to claim that we feel comfortable, confident and powerful with our own bodies; unfortunately, this is not the case for many women, including trans women.

For many *transfeminists*, the issue of body image is where our needs for comfort and safety directly collide with our feminist politics. Many of us feel so uncomfortable and ashamed of our appearances that we opt to remain in the closet or endure electrolysis, hormone therapy and surgical interventions to modify our bodies in congruence with our identity as women. These procedures are costly, painful and time-consuming and can lead to the permanent loss of fertility and other serious complications such as an increased risk of cancer.

Why would anyone opt for such a seemingly inhumane practice? While we might like to believe that the need to match our bodies to our gender identity to be innate or essential, we cannot in honesty neglect social and political factors contributing to our personal decisions.

One such factor is society's enforcement of dichotomous gender roles. Because our identities are constructed within the social environment into which we are born, one could argue that the discontinuity between one's gender identity and physical sex is problematic only because society is actively maintaining a dichotomous gender system. If one's gender were an insignificant factor in society, the need for trans people to modify their bodies to fit into the dichotomy of genders may very well decrease, although probably not completely.

However, such reasoning should not be used to hold back trans persons from making decisions regarding their bodies. Trans women are extremely vulnerable to violence, abuse and discrimination as they are, and should not be made to feel guilty for doing whatever it takes for them to feel safe and comfortable. *Transfeminism* challenges us to consider ways in which social and political factors influence our decisions, but ultimately demands that society respect whatever decisions we each make regarding our own bodies and gender expression.

It is not contradictory to fight against the institutional enforcement of rigid gender roles while simultaneously advocating for individuals' rights to choose how they live in order to feel safe and comfortable. Nor is it contradictory to provide peer support to each other so that we can build healthy self-esteem while embracing individuals' decisions to modify their bodies if they choose to do so. We can each challenge society's arbitrary assumptions about gender and sex without becoming dogmatic. None of us should be expected to reject every oppressive factor in our lives at the same time; it would burn us out and drive us crazy. Sum of our small rebellions combined will destabilize the normative gender system as we know it. Various forms of feminisms, queer activism, *transfeminism*, and other progressive movements all attack different portions of the common target, which is the heterosexist patriarchy.

## **Violence Against Women**

Feminists have identified since the 1970s violence against women was not merely as isolated events, but as a systematic function of the patriarchy to keep all women subjugated. *Transfeminism* calls attention to the fact that trans women, like other groups of women who suffer from multiple oppressions, are particularly vulnerable to violence compared to women with non-trans privilege.

First, trans women are targeted because we live as women. Being a woman in this misogynist society is dangerous, but there are some factors that make us much more vulnerable when we are the targets of sexual and domestic violence. For example, when a man attacks a trans woman, especially if he

tries to rape her, he may discover that the victim has or used to have a “male” anatomy. This discovery often leads to a more violent assault fueled by homophobia and transphobia. Trans women are frequently assaulted by men when their trans status is revealed. Murders of trans women, like that of prostitutes, are seldom taken seriously or sympathetically by the media and the authorities -- especially if the victim is a trans woman engaged in prostitution.

Trans women are also more vulnerable to emotional and verbal abuse by their partners because of their often-low self-esteem and negative body image. It is easy for an abuser to make a trans woman feel ugly, ashamed, worthless and crazy, because these are the same exact messages the whole society has told her over many years. Abusers get away with domestic violence by taking away women's ability to define their own identity and experiences -- the areas where trans women are likely to be vulnerable to begin with. Trans women have additional difficulty in leaving their abusers because it is harder for them to find employment and would almost certainly lose child custody to their abusive partner in a divorce if there were any children involved.

In addition, trans women are targeted for being queer. Homophobes tend not to distinguish between gays and trans people when they commit hate crimes, but trans people are much more vulnerable to attack because they are often more visible than gays. Homophobic terrorists do not look into people's bedrooms when they go out to hunt gays; they look for gendered cues that do not match the perceived sex of their prey, effectively targeting those who are visibly gender-deviant. For every gay man or lesbian whose murder makes national headlines, there are many more trans people who are killed across the nation, even though there are far more “out” gays and lesbians than there are “out” trans people.

Trans men also live in the constant fear of discovery as they navigate in a society that persecutes men who step outside of their socially established roles. Crimes against trans men are committed by strangers as well as by close “friends,” and are undoubtedly motivated by a combination of transphobia and misogyny, performed as a punishment for violating gender norms in order to put them back in a “woman's place.”

Because of the danger in which we live, *transfeminism* believes that violence against trans people is one of the largest issues we must work on. We may be hurt and disappointed that some women-only events refuse to let us in, but it is the violence against us that has literally killed us or forced us to commit suicide way too often for way too long. We have no choice but to act, immediately.

In this regard, cooperation with traditional domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers and hate crime prevention programs is essential. Some shelters have already decided to fully accept trans women just like they would any other women, while others hesitate for various reasons. We must organize and educate existing agencies about why trans women deserve to be served. We must stress that the dynamics of the violence against trans women is not unlike that involving non-trans women, except that we are often more vulnerable. And we should also advocate for services for trans men.

As *transfeminists*, we should not just demand that existing organizations provide services to us; we should join them. We should volunteer to assist them develop an effective screening method in order to preserve safety as they expand their base. We should make ourselves available as crisis counselors and case managers to other trans women in need. We should help them fund trans-specific workshops for their staff too. We should develop self-defense courses for trans women modeled after feminist self-defense

programs for women, but which pay special attention to our unique experiences. There may not be enough of us to start our own shelters from scratch, but we can work toward elimination of the violence against trans people in the broader coalition toward the elimination of violence against women and sexual minorities.

We must also address the issue of economic violence. Trans women are often in poverty because as women we earn less than men do, because overt discrimination against trans people in employment is rampant, and because of the prohibitively high cost of transitioning. This also means that abusive partners of trans women have more leverage to control and keep us trapped in abusive relationships. *Transfeminism* believes in fighting transphobia and sexism simultaneously in the economic arena as well as social and political.

## Health and Reproductive Choice

It may seem ironic that trans women, who in general have no capacity for bearing children, would be interested in the women's reproductive rights movement, but *transfeminism* sees a deep connection between the liberation of trans women and women's right to choose.

First of all, society's stigmatization of trans existence is partly due to the fact that we mess with our reproductive organs. Non-genital cosmetic surgeries are performed far more frequently than sex reassignment surgeries, yet they do not require months of mandatory psychotherapy. Nor are the ones who pursue cosmetic surgeries ridiculed and scorned daily on nationally broadcast trash talk shows. Such hysteria over our personal choices is fueled in part by society's taboo against self-determination of our reproductive organs: like women seeking an abortion, our bodies have become an open territory, a battleground.

Additionally, the hormones that many trans women take are similar in origin and chemical composition to what non-trans women take for birth control, emergency contraception, and hormone replacement therapy. As trans women, we share their concerns over safety, cost and availability of these estrogen-related pills. Trans and non-trans women need to be united against the right-wing tactics aimed at making means and information to control our bodies unavailable, if not illegal.

Of course, reproductive choice is not just about access to abortion or birth control; it is also about resisting forced and coerced sterilization or abortion of less privileged women. Likewise, *transfeminism* strives for the right to refuse surgical and hormonal interventions, including those prescribed for intersex people, and still expect society to honor our sense of who we are.

During the 1980s, lesbians were purged from some reproductive choice organizations because they were seen as irrelevant to their cause. But the right to choose is not exclusively a heterosexual issue nor a non-trans issue, as it is fundamentally about women having the right to determine what they do with their own bodies. *Transfeminists* should join reproductive choice organizations and demonstrate for choice. A society that does not respect women's right to make decisions regarding pregnancy is not likely to respect our right to make decisions about medical interventions to make our bodies in congruence with our gender identity. If we fear having to obtain underground hormones or traveling overseas for a sex reassignment

surgery, we should be able to identify with women who fear going back to the unsafe underground abortions.

In addition, *transfeminism* needs to learn from the women's health movement. Research on health issues that is of particular interest to women, such as breast cancer, did not arise in a vacuum. It was through vigorous activism and peer-education that these issues came to be taken seriously. Realizing that the medical community has historically failed to address women's health concerns adequately, *transfeminists* cannot expect those in the position of power to take trans women's health seriously. That is why we need to participate in and expand the women's health movement.

Drawing analogies from the women's health movement also solves the strategic dilemma over pathologization of gender identity. For many years, trans people have been arguing with each other about whether or not to demand de-pathologization of gender identity disorder, which is currently a pre-requisite for certain medical treatments. It has been a divisive issue because the pathologization of gender identity disorder allows some of us to receive medical interventions, even though it stigmatizes us and negates our agency at the same time. Before the feminist critiques of modern medicine, female bodies are considered "abnormal" by the male-centered standard of the medical establishment, which resulted in the pathologization of such ordinary experiences of women as menstruation, pregnancy and menopause; it was the women's health movement that forced the medical community to accept that they are part of ordinary human experiences. *Transfeminism* insists that transsexuality is not an illness or a disorder, but as much a part of the wide spectrum of ordinary human experiences as pregnancy. It is thus not contradictory to demand medical treatment for trans people to be made more accessible, while de-pathologizing "gender identity disorder."

## **Call for Action**

While we have experienced more than our share of rejection within and outside of feminist communities, those who remained our best allies have also been feminists, lesbians and other queers. *Transfeminism* asserts that it is futile to debate intellectually who is and is not included in the category "women": we must act, now, and build alliances.

Every day, we are harassed, discriminated against, assaulted, and abused. No matter how well we learn to pass, the social invisibility of trans existence will not protect us when all women are under attack. We can never win by playing by society's rule of how women should behave; we need feminism as much as non-trans women do, if not more. *Transfeminists* take pride in the tradition of our feminist foremothers and continue their struggle in our own lives.

*Transfeminism* believes that a society that honors cross-gender identities is the one that treats people of all genders fairly, because our existence is seen as problematic only when there is a rigid gender hierarchy. In this belief, it is essential for our survival and dignity that we claim our place in feminism, not in a threatening or invasive manner, but in friendly and cooperative ways. Initial suspicion and rejection from some existing feminist institutions are only natural, especially since they have been betrayed so many times by self-identified "pro-feminist" men; it is through our persistence and commitment to action that *transfeminism* will transform the scope of feminism into a more inclusive vision of the world.

## **Postscript for *Catching A Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century***

I wrote *The Transfeminist Manifesto* in summer 2000, only a couple of months after I had moved to Portland, found transgender and transsexual communities and began exploring the intersections of feminism and trans experiences. I guess I was naive, but initially I was surprised when I found out that there was anti-trans sentiments among some feminists, and anti-feminist sentiment among some trans people, because the trans people I had met were the kind of people I respect as both feminists and trans activists. I wrote this manifesto in order to articulate a feminist theory that is decidedly pro-trans, and a trans rhetoric that is rooted in feminism. I think I succeeded.

There are, however, problems with this manifesto that I am not very happy with. In several revisions I made over the last two years, I fixed some of the minor problems, but there are larger problems that are left intact, because they cannot be fixed without re-writing the entire piece. But I think it is important to discuss what these problems are, and why they crept into this manifesto. Two of these larger problems are:

- Overemphasis on male-to-female trans people at the expense of female-to-male trans people and others who identify as transgender or genderqueer. I take full blame for the fact that this manifesto is heavily focused on issues male-to-female transsexual people face, while neglecting unique struggles that female-to-male trans people and other transgender and genderqueer people face. At the time I wrote this piece, I felt the need to restrict the focus of feminism to “women” because I feared that expanding the focus would permit non-trans men to exploit feminism for their interest, as some so-called men’s rights groups do. While I still feel that this fear is justified, I now realize that privileging transsexual women’s issues at the expense of other trans and genderqueer people was a mistake.

- Inadequate intersectional analysis. The manifesto focuses mainly on the intersection of sexism and the oppression against trans people, yet fails to address how these issues intersect with other social injustices. For example, the manifesto references the critiques made by women of color against white women’s racism within the feminist movement, but fails to address how trans women can become allies to women of color. Again, I hesitated moving the focus away from sexism at the time I wrote this manifesto, as I feared other (non-trans) feminists’ criticisms. Now I agree with the notion that any feminist theory that fails to account for racism, classism, ableism, etc. operating amongst women is incomplete, and I concede that this manifesto is incomplete.

While these are very different critiques, they both come from the same source: the idea that feminists should focus primarily – sometimes solely – on the oppression that all women experience. In this worldview, issues such as racism and classism can be addressed only when it furthers the battle against the patriarchy – for example, addressing white men’s racism against women of color – but not when it is seen as “divisive” for – or rather, exposes the hidden divisions within – the women’s movement. This manifesto for the most part plays into this trajectory while failing to challenge its racist, classist, etc., implications, and it deserves criticism for that. I realize now that, at the time I wrote the manifesto, I did not feel secure enough in my own conviction in multi-issue organizing, and gave into the fear that I would be criticized for diluting feminism. It was through the camaraderie with other fierce women of color,

working-class women, and women with disabilities I gained in the last couple of years that I became free from this fear.

I have thought about writing a new manifesto to address these and other insights I gained since 2000, with the confidence and clarity I have now, but for now I am leaving the task to others. If you write one, please send it to me.

## **Bonus: Racist Feminism at the National Women's Studies Association**

Emi Koyama

June 28, 2008

In March, I was invited to speak at the “tribute panel” dedicated to Black feminist thought, especially the work and life of Audre Lorde during the National Women's Studies Association. I felt honored, and more than slightly intimidated, to be selected to address the importance of Audre Lorde's work in my own life as well as in the feminist movement at large. Other panelists were Kaila Adia Story (University of Louisville) and Melinda L. de Jesus (California College of the Arts).

It was during my second year of college I was first introduced to the writings of Audre in a Women's Studies course. Throughout the academic term, students read several articles each week, discussed them in the class, and wrote journal entries that reflect on the week's readings. Week after week, most of the assigned materials were those written by white, middle-class, straight (or sometimes “political lesbian”) women, and I was having difficulty relating to much of what was being discussed. I kept writing in my journal how I didn't relate to the reading, but I did not realize it had anything to do with the selection of the materials. I felt bad about being so “negative” about feminism and feminists.

Toward the end of the term, one week was dedicated to the work of “women of color” (yes, a whole week—woo hoo!). If I remember correctly, it consisted of selections from the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (Combahee River Collective statement, and I think one of the Cherrie Moraga's pieces) and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*. For the first time, these articles spoke to me. They gave voice to my feelings of alienation and frustration that I could not point a finger on. And even though it was just a week out of the entire term, and it is possibly the worst form of tokenism within the discipline, they anchored me to feminism and Women's Studies to this date. Without *Sister Outsider*, I may not have been a feminist today.

But one week was not enough for me to gain the confidence and strength it took to speak out when I find myself surrounded by white middle-class feminists who seemed oblivious to the emotional pain and sadness their racist or classist statements and actions caused. It was not enough to just read things written by Audre and others like her; I needed to actually construct a support system around me, people of all races and genders who are passionately committed to justice in all aspects of society and to empathically holding each other accountable.

In summer of 2000, I moved to Portland, Oregon—the first large city I lived as an adult. On my second day in Portland, I met Diana Courvant, a white transsexual woman who founded Survivor Project to address the needs of trans and intersex survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Also a survivor with a

complex history around gender and sexual identities, I immediately became involved with Survivor Project. It also helped that Diana was a veteran of multi-issue social justice organizing, and I learned a lot from her.

But as I got to know Diana, I also learned that not all feminists embraced trans people. In fact, she was at the time trapped in the middle of the worst nightmare of controversy within Portland's lesbian/feminist community, which she later wrote about (see "Speaking of Privilege" in *This Bridge We Call Home*, edited by Gloria Anzaldua and AnaLouise Keating). To put it short: Diana was invited to a women's retreat in the Oregon forest, which after she accepted the invitation instituted a "no penis" policy banning transsexual women who had not have sex reassignment surgery from attending. She declined to participate, but held a workshop on trans issues outside with the help of non-trans allies. The workshop was successful, but a rumor was spread shortly thereafter alleging that she trespassed on the women-only retreat and exposed herself. It was obviously false, but extremely hurtful.

It was in response to this climate I wrote the piece "The Transfeminist Manifesto," which was later published in the anthology *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* edited by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier. The manifesto addressed various feminist concerns, such as reproductive choice and health and violence against women, and discussed how transsexual women share many of the concerns of other women. I wanted to write a feminist theory that counter the argument that transsexual women were so different from all other women that there is no place for transsexual women within feminism (or that feminism has no use for transsexual women). I wanted to provide easy-to-repeat arguments that pro-trans feminists can use to confront blatant bigotry and falsehoods against transsexual women. And to these ends, I think "Manifesto" was successful.

But there was something unsettling about the "Manifesto." In an effort to forge an alliance between transsexual and non-transsexual women, the piece neglected the struggles of transsexual men and other transgender or genderqueer people who do not identify as "women" unless it was convenient to include them. The piece was also weak on intersectional analysis—that is, how anti-trans sentiments and oppressions compound and complicate oppressions other than sexism, including and especially racism and classism. It borrowed from the work of women of color when it was useful—for example, to point out that transsexual women's unique experiences should not be the basis for their exclusion because to do so would presuppose a singular universal female experience, which is obviously false—without contributing any insights as to how the inclusion of trans sensibility helps to fight racism and other oppressions.

The fact is, I had only been living in my new home town for three months or so when I wrote this piece, and I was not fully in touch with my own discomfort with the white feminism that filled nine out of ten weeks of the Introduction to Women's Studies, nor did I feel confident enough to challenge the view that feminism is simply about advocating for women and fighting sexism—and nothing more. In short, what I had written was a version of white feminism that was modified just enough to include transsexual women. At the time, I felt that it was the only safe way to write a feminist theory that advanced transsexual women's place within feminism. I spent next couple of years meeting more people with a common commitment for justice for all, slowly building the self-confidence it takes to "transform silence into language and action," as Audre famously stated.

What I will discuss below is one such silence that was turned into language and action.

The invitation to speak at the panel honoring the legacy of Audre Lorde stated: “NWSA would be please to offer you complimentary conference registration as a way of thanking you for your time and expertise. Regrettably, however, NWSA has a limited budget and cannot cover your travel expenses.” But I am not a career academic, and without regular employment I cannot afford to spend hundreds of dollars just to speak at an academic conference. I wrote back explaining my situation and asking for financial assistance to attend the conference, to which the executive director of NWSA repeated, “NWSA would be able to offer complimentary membership and registration; I certainly wish we could do more.”

I began talking to some members of Governing Council (board of directors of NWSA) I happen to know, and asked them to advocate on my behalf; they emailed the director, but the response was the same. I also learned that another long-time queer social justice activist I respect was invited by NWSA last year, but she had to turn down the invitation due to the organization’s unwillingness to cover her travel expense. I could decline the invitation too, but then NWSA could go on every year attempting to exploit activists while pretending to honor and support their work without anyone challenging them on it, so I decided to do something different: I wrote to WMST-L, an international Women’s Studies email list with thousands of subscribers, explaining the circumstance and asking people to write to the NWSA to protest its practice, and to donate some money for me to attend the conference.

Within days, I received a dozen or so offers of contributions, and just as many apparently wrote to the executive director of NWSA, including members of Governing Council. Lesbian Caucus chair Lisa Burke, Women of Color Caucus co-chair Pat Washington, and Bisexual/Transgender Interest Group rep Joelle Ruby Ryan were among the most supportive. But that was when things began turning bizarre. The executive director apparently told some of my supporters that I was already being provided a hotel room on NWSA’s money, implicitly suggesting that I was being dishonest or possibly running a scheme to defraud well-intentioned feminist scholars. Thinking that the director perhaps changed her mind and decided to fund at least some of my expenses, I contacted NWSA again—only to be told that nothing had changed and I was still on my own (albeit with the help of many supporters).

I received enough donations to cover most of my expenses, so I flew to Cincinnati to take part in the tribute panel. In my speech, I talked about how I discovered the work of Audre Lorde, how important it was, and yet how reading her books was not enough to genuinely feel empowered. I read from a postscript I wrote for “The Transfeminist Manifesto” and how that piece reflects a period in my life in which I was cautiously negotiating my place within feminism. Then I spoke about the panel itself, and how I seriously struggled whether or not I should participate in this celebration of Audre Lorde and her work, when the very structure of the forum betrayed her legacy.

I have to wonder, I said, if Audre were still around, she would accept the invitation to speak at this conference under such humiliating circumstances. Audre does not deserve this. And this “tribute panel” was not the proper way to honor and memorialize Audre’s contribution to Women’s Studies. And part of the reason I felt ambivalent about speaking on this panel was due to the fear that my presence at the conference might help legitimize what is fundamentally illegitimate.

Audre herself faced similar circumstance in 1979, when she was invited to speak in the “only panel at [Second Sex Conference, held at New York University] where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented,” despite the fact that she accepted the invitation “with the understanding that [Lorde]

would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of american women,” which would not be possible “without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians.” Her talk, titled “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” which is included in *Sister Outsider*, is not nearly as well understood as the title is known.

When Audre said “master’s tools,” what she was referring to was white, middle-class, straight feminists’ unwillingness to recognize the differences among women along the lines of race, class, sexuality, etc. By failing to seize the strength that could come from the acknowledgement of differences, not just between white and Black women, but also among Black women—why did the organizers fail to involve more Black women, as if expecting Audre to represent all Black women?—she alleges that many white feminists are complicit in maintaining the racist, homophobic patriarchy.

In a different text, also part of *Sister Outsider*, Audre once declared that she would never talk to white women about racism again. Obviously that was not the last time she did, but I have no doubt that she frequently struggled with the urge to give up. Part of the reason I decided finally to attend the conference and to speak at the tribute was the recognition that I stand on the shoulders of Audre Lorde and her contemporaries, many of whom are still alive but many are gone. The panel was successful, and the discussion involving three panelists and the audience lasted almost three hours even though it was originally scheduled for only 75 minutes.

During the delegate assembly on the next day, Lisa Burke from the lesbian caucus spoke out. The executive director had promised her that she would “take care of” my situation, which was understood to mean that NWSA would at the least provide my housing for the conference, and yet somehow it did not happen. The director responded that NWSA did in fact booked a room for me and paid for it out of its account, and blamed her assistant, a Black woman who was not present in the room, for the “miscommunication.” Lisa protested this act of scapegoating and called for the organization to reimburse me for the lodging expense and to issue an official apology. Every delegate voted in favor of the motion. The resolution almost made me feel guilty, partly because another woman of color is pitted against me and blamed for the whole ordeal, and partly because the thought of a \$170/night room sitting empty for me is too wasteful for me to think about.

I called the hotel next morning to find out how much NWSA had paid for the room that I did not know was reserved for me, but the clerk informed me that there was no record of reservation for any nights this past week. There is still a remote possibility that NWSA made a reservation at another hotel nearby because the conference hotel was sold out. But that seems unlikely, especially since the organization had no idea which date I was planning to come to Cincinnati or to go home. It is too depressing to think that the executive director of a national feminist, scholarly institution would engage in such pattern of dishonesty and racism in the process of organizing and hosting a tribute to the legacy of Audre Lorde.

In a sense, the tribute panel turned out to be the perfect commemoration of Audre’s legacy. It exposed the ugly reality of what Audre calls “racist feminism,” which was lurking behind the superficial public rhetoric of anti-racism. It brought up intense emotions, including anger, and we sought to channel them for constructive uses. We paid tribute to Audre the best way we could, which was not by reading

some academic papers about her, but by being passionately engaged in the struggle against the oppression of all people. I hope that I did my part to make her proud.