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Doing the *: Performing the Radical in Antisexist and Antiracist Work

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Doing the *: Performing the Radical in Antisexist and Antiracist Work

Abstract

The essay summarizes excerpts from the 6th Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogue's (SFD) session, "Doing the *: Performing the Radical in Antisexist and Antiracist Work." In this dialogue, students read, displayed, or performed excerpts from feminist manifestos that they authored in a feminist theory or women and gender studies course at The College at Brockport. The manifesto assignment asked students to select a contemporary feminist issue, and using text or text with performance, expose and analyze the issue drawing from "*The Combahee River Collective*" joined with "*Trans *: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability.*" Prompted by the 6th Biennial SFD theme, "Race and Intersecting Feminist Futures," we selected the *Combahee River Collective* and *Trans ** as our main theoretical frame because of ways these writings disrupt white heteronormativity and ways that they integrate an intersectional lens as means to critique gender and racial inequalities.

Keywords

Radical Feminism, Intersectionality, Identity Politics

DOING THE *: PERFORMING THE RADICAL IN ANTISEXIST AND ANTIRACIST WORK

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The essay summarizes excerpts from the 6th Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogue's (SFD) session of the same title. In this dialogue, students read, displayed, or performed excerpts from feminist manifestos that they authored in a feminist theory or women and gender studies course at The College at Brockport. The manifesto assignment asked students to select a contemporary feminist issue, and using text or text with performance, expose and analyze the issue drawing from the Combahee River Collective Statement and *Trans *: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*.¹ Prompted by the 6th Biennial SFD theme, "Race and Intersecting Feminist Futures," we selected the Combahee River Collective Statement and *Trans ** as our main theoretical frame because of the ways these writings disrupt white heteronormativity and the ways that they integrate an intersectional lens as means to critique gender and racial inequalities.

As a map to the essay, we provide a brief synopsis of the *Combahee River Collective Statement* and *Trans **, followed by the SFD manifestos. The manifestos problematize identity as gendered (April), question the sexualization of girls and women (Whitehorne), critique commodification of women's bodies (Mohamed), and interrogate the intersection of race and gender (Pickett). We close the essay with a video link to Pickett's manifesto dance, which, in its antiracist/antisexist narrative, draws inspiration from Black feminist thinkers Audre Lorde and The

¹ In *Trans *: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (2018), Jack Halberstam theorizes the * as a multi-sided projectile that signifies movement across identities. While not a universal symbol for Trans identity, we use Halberstam's * as he applies it to Trans identity as a way to explain gender fluidity. We discuss the * and its context to our essay in subsequent paragraphs.

Combahee River Collective authors. As an intersectional bridge, this dance circles back to Halberstam who, inspired by the gender bending artistry and identities of David Bowie and Prince, introduces *Trans ** with the proposal: “Let’s Dance” (xiii).

TRANS*: A QUICK AND QUIRKY ACCOUNT OF GENDER VARIABILITY

Tong and Botts define the radical in radical feminist thought as disrupting or tearing up the roots to systems of inequality (39-71). In contrast to liberal feminist movements that deploy reform-based approaches to equality—women gaining civic voice through suffrage as a classic example—radical feminism seeks to eradicate the origin sites that breed inequality practices. Liberation, as opposed to reformation, is the radical feminist goal.

In the radical feminism of *Trans **, Halberstam seeks to disrupt heteronormative thinking that links sex and gender as a rigid, binary, man as masculine and woman as feminine, system. In this disruption, Halberstam also seeks to move our gaze away from the Trans body as the site of gender variance. Drawing from Laura Marks’ *Touch* (2002), Halberstam theorizes the haptic as a multi-sided projectile that signifies movement across identities where bodies hold multiple and changing identity parameters that surpass the visual and corporal signals under which social categories of identity originate. Reimagining the Trans body, Halberstam deploys the haptic to symbolize the affective dimensions of identity formation where using a sense of touch, for example, signifies sensory ways to know and create our social and physical realities. As Halberstam explains, “The haptic body and the haptic self are not known in advance but improvised over and over on behalf of a willful and freeing sense of bewilderment” (92). The word “bewilderment’ shifts the meaning of to “be lost” and “confound” into to “be wild” and “free,” liberating us from binary identity classifications that society places on Trans bodies. In freeing the Trans body then from the institutionalized naming and coding of identity, we free ourselves from the restrictions that society constructs around naming and codifying all identities. The authors of this piece press Halbertsam’s *Trans ** thinking forward in feminist manifestos that take the form of essays with video, poetry, and dance as they argue for a body politic that proscribes gender rigidity. April uses essay and video to tease out how, in girlhood, “we put too much pressure on the ones we are supposed to guide and encourage.” In poetry, Whitehorne argues for

bodies that resist directives for “what parts of you deserve to be on display,” and Kamal-Mohamed describes ways a Mattel Barbie doll must “sculpt her tits.” And in movement, Picket performs a dance that she choreographed where she qualifies identity “as freeing, wide.” In all four examples, the manifesto writers disrupt gendering, each pushing back against binary systems of power and dominance that privilege white, cis, male consumption.

For Halberstam then, rather than looking at whose gender is variable, often read and coded as trans and deviant and whose gender is fixed, often read and coded as cis and normative; we instead should explore how gender changes across all bodies. Thematic to our SFD manifestos, the *Trans ** Halberstam pioneers seek to sense gender identity as fluid movement projected across multiple settings, to recognize gender identity as performed by multiple bodies, and to reimagine and discover gender identity in the unexpected. In this radically conceived site for the gender haptic, Halberstam argues that trans identity is not a destination placed on gender variant bodies but rather that gender variance is a multifaceted phenomenon which all bodies enact.

THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE STATEMENT

Staying close to radical disruption as a feminist liberation platform, the Combahee River Collective is reflective of a group of Black radical feminists who began meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1974 to rally around issues of racist, classist, and sexist exclusion. While representative of a larger collective of black women, Black feminist lesbians Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith are the Statement’s primary authors. In the *Combahee River Collective Statement*, the authors theorize tenets of intersectionality years before legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw named intersectionality as such: a power-over phenomenon where societal oppressions synergize when multiple categories of marginalized identities intersect. Using an intersectional lens, the Combahee authors write about their experiences as Black and lesbian at a time when the 1970s liberal feminist movement for sexual equality largely catered to white, middle class, cis, straight women. The Collective tied their 1970s black feminist resistance to the 1863 Combahee River Raid where Harriett Tubman helped free more than 750 slaves.

In the *Combahee River Collective Statement*, the authors operationalize the phrase “identity politics,” where they challenge racism and sexism common to the wider U.S. feminist movement. Analogous to Halberstam’s haptic project to disrupt oppressions rooted in gender, the Combahee River Collective authors sought to eradicate racist, classist, and sexist repressions that capitalism, western imperialism, and white heteropatriarchal ideologies manufacture. Penned in 1977 but arguably words that many women of color could have spoken yesterday, the Combahee River Collective authors affirm:

We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see our particular task the development integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (15)

Disillusioned with second wave feminism that excluded the experiences of black, lesbian, lower socioeconomic women in their activist agendas — the National Organization of Women (NOW), as one example — the Combahee River Collective argued for a new platform to reconcile interlocking racial, sexual, heterosexual, and classist oppressions.

The Combahee River Collective Statement paved the way for grassroots organizing among people of color who face racism and sexism. And the Collective was revolutionary in this regard, although, until recently, largely overlooked for their feminist contributions, both in being the first to cast out and define “identity politics” as a radical feminist construct, and to launch “consciousness-raising” activism that tackled these identity politics in ways that named interlocking systems of oppressions that grow out of sex, gender, sexuality, class, and racial inequality practices. Pickett’s SFD manifesto dance, where she uses masking tape to draw boxes on her dance floor, with the tape representing the racist and sexist restrictions society places on brown and black women’s bodies, and her choreography, where she dances in and outside these tape boxes, represents the intersectional identity politics that *The Combahee River Collective Statement* engenders. Pickett chose tape as part of her choreography, explaining, “even though it sticks, it is easy to remove. Tape is something that can be

reshaped and disposed of.” In this way, Pickett’s dance captures ways society too easily throws away the oppressions marginalized groups experience. Complementing her Combahee River Collective interpretation, Pickett adds black feminist lesbian poet Audre Lorde to her analysis, performing her dance not only as an act of resistance to racist and classist exclusions prominent to feminist movements, but in the bridge building spirit of Lorde’s poetry and writing, as a tool to step within and across our feminist differences. That feminist bridge, if we were to construct one, could not be more vital today as sexism and racism fester within and around surging white nationalist ideals. Demita Frazier, one of the Combahee River Collective authors, sanctions the enduring importance in *The Combahee River Collective Statement*, where it serves as a lens to past exclusions and as a reminder that Black women still are not free (29).

MANIFESTOS

Students who wrote on or spoke their SFD manifestos posed the following thinking questions: How might voice and bodies enact or perform antiracist and antisexist work? What does intersectional, radical gender equality work look like in future feminist praxis? And how can we break free from a western grammar of bodies so we create embodiment that sometimes falls apart or unmakes bodies into new sites for embodiment? Using *The Combahee River Collective Statement* and *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, the manifestos that follow link “intersectional feminist resistance” with “transfeminism” to do and undo classifications of sex, gender, race, and other social categories of identity.

“Growing Up Girl” by Mackenzie April

To me, a manifesto could be anything that brings your unique intellect to light while bringing forward an issue that’s important to you through any form of communication. A dance, a poem, an art piece, etc. are all forms of expression with a goal of educating in an accessible, emotional way. In my *Feminist Theory* class, we were encouraged to create a unique piece to share with our peers that brought a feminist issue to the table while incorporating the thinkers we studied over the semester. For my manifesto, I was able to bring together two things I thoroughly enjoy to make a strong feminist art piece that I could share with my

classmates and eventually, Seneca Falls Dialogues goes. These two things were filmmaking and girl studies.

My piece “Growing Up Girl” is a short film dedicated to acknowledging the lives of girls from different backgrounds. Ideally, I would have interviewed girls between the ages of 8-12, but for this project I decided to take advantage of my role as a Resident Assistant on campus in a freshman dorm. Not only was I able to really sit down and get to know the unique backgrounds of a handful of my residents who identify as women, but I had a chance to slow down and get first-hand testimonials from people who lived the real thing.

Girlhood is weird. If there were a thesis I drew from the making of my manifesto, it would be that we put too much pressure on the ones we are supposed to guide and encourage. We put too much pressure on and hurt our future too much. Girls are expected to act womanly and feminine at a young age while also having to hold back their emotions and vulnerability to fit in with the popular crowd. Acceptance is the bare minimum that girls should be given, but in reality, it’s something we all had to work for. On the other hand, boys are encouraged to go outside and play. To be active. To be crazy, loud, or the popular class clown. That is not to say that boys aren’t put under pressure, because they are; but when it comes down to it, oppression of young girls—especially through girl-girl interaction, dress codes and overall societal expectations—is much more evident.

A big part of my interview research focused on girl groups and drama in middle and elementary school. One consistent remembrance of growing up among my interviewees was the competitiveness felt while interacting with their girl classmates. For example, one of my interviewees mentioned feeling pressured to get her first period before her friends to seem more mature and thus above the others in some intangible way. Another one mentioned how competitive dating was in middle school and the shame they’d feel—as a punishment for that competition—for having their first kiss.

Reflection on my own childhood was pretty essential in this process, since it brought to the table some memories that I had made sure to bury growing up. The message in my manifesto is not to say that being a girl sucks, or that boys need to be punished. But if there’s anything we can draw from it, it’s that being attentive to the stories of girls is important if we’re going to make any radical change for them. Radical change for women must start with radical

change for girls, to make sure they grow up feeling empowered (whatever that means to them), valued and never alone.

Here is the link to "Growing Up Girl":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoPMIWJEKu4&feature=youtu.be>

"Manifesto for the Young Girl I Was" by Angelica Whitehorne

Never miss another pool party because you forgot to shave some abstract part of your body.

Don't let anyone tell you what parts of you deserve to be on display. breasts but not the forests that grow under your armpits.

Don't talk only about shaving your legs

because it is normalized

by those odd women in the ads

with shower caps

who shave already smooth limbs with bladeless razors.

Call out the bullshit of photoshop even if you aren't supposed to curse

become a bullshit detective and make the entire media portrayal of femininity your crime case.

Who said freckles were beautiful and acne was not?

Don't forget to tell your body that a beating heart is the only attribute it needs to survive.

Never stop growing to be shorter than your prom date

grow to 6 feet tall

grow taller

under the fertilizer of all these compliments—

But more importantly with the knowledge

of your immaterial greatness, your unempirical importance.

Reject reliance on the ever-shifting world around you, on all your favorite beauty brands

and all your favorite friends

only your own fortitude

can be counted on forever.

Don't let these glimpses of tragic days become lifetimes of
tragedies,
Sun comes and rain comes and sun will come again.

Remember stubborn is even more of a compliment when given as an insult,
Be an ox in all of your beliefs.

If you find something is wrong, never think you are too young or too quiet or
too small to fix it, you can fix it.
And most importantly make your own truth, never trust a manifesto

"Dear Mattel Employees" by Jasmine Kamal-Mohamed

Don't fret over blueprints;
She's already pre-planned.
She'll look the way she always has;
Her plastic cold and bland.

We'll start with her feet,
Pointed and shaped
To fit every high heel
Without her toes being taped.

From slim ankles we scale
To legs luxurious and long
That no real girl has,
So no real girl belongs.

Her hips must be just wide enough
To form an hourglass,
But her stomach just flat enough
So no air can pass.

Finally, you sculpt her tits:
The only things with fat.
Make them perky but with no nipples,
Because no child should be exposed to that.

Lastly is her face:
Symmetrical, painted,
And a head of hair so heavy and long
She certainly should have fainted.

Now, you have your Barbie Doll
Who can't stand up by herself.
So, lean her against Brad or Ken
Or against a dusty shelf.

"Combahee River Collective and Audre Lorde: Representation of Tape as Intersectionality and Re-bridging Marginalized Groups" by Kendra Pickett

Dance is a form of expression and voice. It is powerful and can get a message across without the use of words or sentences to build an explanation. Many feminist thinkers expressed themselves through songs, poems, writing, speeches, and as an individual and within communities. Audre Lorde was a feminist, womanist, librarian, writer, poet, and civil rights activist. She was interested in bridging marginalized groups. Instead of finding a sense of unity between these groups, she urged awareness and acceptance of differences. This is what she believed laid down the foundation and directs these groups.

The Combahee River Collective was a black feminist lesbian organization that took off in Boston from 1974 to 1980. This collective was founded and created by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier. This group focused on bringing peoples' attention to how the white feminist movement did not address needs that included everyone. These women made sure not to shame black women but to lift them up. They acknowledged how some black women have the tools for opportunity. This collective also brought up intersectionality and the simultaneous oppression black women face every day.

Audre Lorde and The Combahee River Collective both brought up intersectionality and the negativity that marginalized groups encounter. The dance I created was built from a place of passion similar to the passion these influential Combahee River Collective individuals exhibited in their writing and activist work. I chose to use tape as part of my dance choreography as a way to symbolize intersectionality and the way simultaneous oppressions create limitations and struggles for many individuals. I chose tape because even though it sticks, it is easy to remove. Tape is something that can be reshaped and disposed of. The oppression these marginalized groups struggle with is permanent but also something society can throw away.

I created the dance stage in my house, specifically my bedroom. I chose this setting. I wanted it to feel very personal and for myself to be exposed. I wanted to leave my desk in the room because it was an object that was supported. I wanted my desk to symbolize the core of beliefs, perspectives, and opinions of individuals and marginalized groups. I knew I wanted the dance to

start by me “walking” out from the camera, as if the viewer could be in my shoes or a part of the dance. I also wanted to include me laying down the tape, ripping it off, re-bridging the tape to the camera, and in the end, getting rid of it all.

My dance movements needed to be different when performed inside the tape compared to when I tore off the tape. I made my movement in the tape in a small kinesphere and close to my body. Once the tape (oppression) was removed, I wanted my movement to be described as freeing, wide, and big. Dance has much more to it than just the movement. I hope the connections I made with Audre Lorde and The Combahee River Collective impact viewers and readers of my work.

In the spirit of the Combahee River Collective and Halberstam’s *Trans **, “Let’s dance” (15).

Link to “Combahee River Collective and Audre Lorde: Representation of Tape as Intersectionality and Re-bridging Marginalized Groups”: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ao0d8pn2s_Ysox5VHVrk01yrCLViOKhE/view?ts=5c534597

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