

Nasty Women Join the Hive

[artists statement]

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The Problem (Call): Sheila

After the election, I felt such an urgency. I wanted to be surrounded, or, I knew I ought to seek out people in similar distress. Actual, embodied persons. Flesh and sinew and respiratory systems rather than icons, avatars, profile pics. The echo chamber of righteous indignation. I'd never marched before, and the idea of a crowd, a mass, a throng felt terrifying, even depleting. There is a reason some of us retreat to the safety of a blue text box on a screen.

(For some of us, safety is a given.)

And yet, it felt like time. My daughter, 9 and my son, 11—we're trying hard to raise them with feminist principles. I felt swept by the energy and momentum of the marches I knew were forming all over the country (I didn't understand it would end up being the world). I imagined a wound, a body charred by fire --we all felt blown to bits--but cracking itself open into a new, pink healing.

(But already we have a problem. I do. I'm looking at that sentence just above, wherein I figure myself blown to bits, charred, a body, a wound. Mine is metaphorical maiming. My body remains intact. But there are others, elsewhere and certainly in Pittsburgh, for whom this image is both metaphorical and literal. **Pink. Bodies. Bits.**)

Pittsburgh planned a women's march to connect to the weaving web of Women's

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Marches™ that began in D.C. and sprung up everywhere, everywhere. We'll go, I told my daughter, as I clicked to purchase our pink pussy hats. Light pink for her, bright pink for me. I would rather have asked my friend Sandra to knit them for us, but there would be no time. She was already knitting for so many others. \$20 a pop felt (I'll admit) steep for this unknown-to-me vendor, for this thing I'd don once. But it's a symbol, right? An important artifact, a representation of unity (support women-owned business!) we can be proud to wear and carefully keep.

(Who gets to be included? Who's been traditionally left out?)

Then, in the blue text box on the screen, I begin to see an unravelling. I quietly follow a thread in which women of color document problems with the way the Pittsburgh Women's March™ machinations are developing. They say they have not been invited to be a meaningful part of the planning. They describe a meeting in a suburban chain restaurant where white women have taken the lead, making them feel unwanted, un-listened to.

(Blue box. Pink hat. White suburb.)

In the box I read comments, carefully. I try to understand. To listen. It sounds reasonable, what they are saying. They want a de-centering of White Feminism. (I am a White Feminist.) They want an acknowledgment of the intersectional issues that have plagued Pittsburgh (everywhere, everywhere). They want the voices of women of color and femmes to fill the room, for once.

(But again there's a problem. In the paragraph above, the one I just wrote, I'm wondering how best to arrange sentences so that my (white) voice doesn't come last. I teach my students the power of the final word in a line/stanza of poetry. And yet, even as I'm writing this, I see the deep irony in this parenthetical aside.)

Someone criticizes the planning of the Pittsburgh Women's March™ with respect to the above. **(Just listen!)** Someone defends it, says any slights were unintentional, not racist. Someone says "erasure." Someone says "diminishing." Someone says, this is not a new phenomenon, Pittsburgh. Get your shit right.

To say that a fracture then happened would be both literal and metaphorical. A new march, planned and lead by seasoned activists—**black women and femmes**—rose up in East Liberty, an historically important neighborhood for Black people in the city. An embodied throng my family chose to join instead of the downtown masses. We stood in the dirt and grass in front of Penn Plaza apartments, a site that had been threatened by plans to build a Whole Foods Market, its residents displaced in a textbook gentrification move. They called their march "**Our Feminism Must Be Intersectional.**" They asked us to listen to their history and help them move toward *real* equality. They asked us to think about the commodification of feminism and social justice. To prioritize intersectionality. To question our motives and our complicity.

(I teach this to my memoir students. You have to be willing to show your whole ass.)

They asked us to *pick up our signs* and *leave our pink pussy hats home*. The overwhelming critique of the marches is that they were too white (Kozol, 2017), too

nice, too homogenous (Xiao, 2017), too vagina-centric (Riddell, 2017), too unfocused (Dvorak, 2017), too stereotypically feminine (Derr, 2017).

My daughter was disappointed but I did my best to explain. It's still a symbol of something important, but now it's richer, more complicated. More complex. She put hers in a box at the top of her closet.

We took our places near the back of the crowd by the fence.

(I want to keep learning.)

Behind us, a halted construction site.

In front of us, black women and femmes on stage with a microphone. Electric possibility, defiant and embodied, claiming their home.

Can you be a White Feminist without embracing White Feminism? (Response):
Sandra

Sheila and I have been friends, collaborative partners, and writing buddies for quite a few years. The morning after the election, we checked in on instant messenger, as we do, typing slowly.

What are we going to do? Sheila typed.

I am going to do what I know how to do, what I can do. Make art. Write poetry. Teach. Community Service. I typed. I am a White woman, and a (White) feminist. I am director of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at BGSU. I am a feminist ethnographer, competitive knitter, runner, and poet. I have to do something. I do what I know how to do. Educate. Write. Knit. Talk.

In January, 2017, someone sent me a link to a pattern for a pussy hat. Women contacted me via email and over Facebook asking if I could possibly knit them or their partners a hat. I knit pink hat after pink hat for friends and friends of friends. I knit pink hats during meetings, knit over coffee with friends and colleagues who will attend the Women's March™ in DC and other places. I knit. I knit and write. I call my representatives. I talk with students. I talk with my Brownie Girl Scouts.

I knit 12 pussy hats. I write about my (White) feminist middle-aged rage. I decide to take my daughter and partner to the march in Ann Arbor, because it is close. We host a sign-making party for students and friends who will march with us. I am thrilled when my daughter makes her own sign after we explain why we will march: "Girls Choose Rights!" I knit a hat for myself and my daughter. At the march, I we shout about immigrant rights, reproductive rights, but I see many White faces—White bodies and White women's bodies holding space and marching freely, unmolested by police violence (Ramanathan, 2017)

And I don't hear the other voices at first. The critique of pussy hats as equating women's rights to white cis-gendered able-bodied women's vaginas (Compton, 2017); pussy hats as representing White privilege (Kozol, 2017); White women wearing pink hats and not acknowledging racism, body essentialism, and not listening to people of color, disabled, and trans* rights activists (Mosthof, 2017).

I didn't consider that placing White in the parenthetical is part of the problem.

Sandra L. Faulkner & Sheila Squillante

Sheila and I decide to write collaborative poetry in response. I share a poem about the inauguration. She responds with a poem. We play a game of exquisite corpse with themes of a Trump presidency: rape culture, misogyny, locker room talk, feminist response. We write a womanifesta with text, images, and sound. We consider how an intersectional feminism can be realized with the hive metaphor: we remix an intersectional approach through an appeal to White feminists.

Sheila and I keep talking. She tells me how things in the Pittsburgh march fell apart because of White women. There would be another march where White women were not centered, where pussy hats would not be visible.

We think about being White women. We think about being White feminists. We ask how we can be White Feminists without White Feminism. Fifty-three percent of Trump's vote was White women. This is our audience.

We ask. We start to listen. We invite other White feminists to listen. Then to act.

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