

Neitherfemme
[artist statement]
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In the wake of Trump’s election I joined millions across the nation and globe in entering a prolonged state of confusion, a thick fog during which my inner compass spun around in dizzy circles, unable to find the north. For me, that north would have been the sense of conviction and belief in progress and multicultural liberal values that I had held steadfast for at least 20 years and which prompted my coming to the U.S. for studies in 1998 and staying here for good. Moving, as an adult, to another country, is a profound life change, more consequential than marriage or even than having children: it is the equivalent of a seismic shift of cultural values and perspectives that may well end up altering your DNA (I mean this not just metaphorically: if stress can alter gene expression, as studies have shown, why shouldn’t a complex and stressful phenomenon such as immigration?). However, I was forced to confront the fact the country I had chosen to entrust my new destiny to had just chosen Donald Trump to be its president; one could surely not envision a more stereotypical choice for an “ugly American” than that. So what did that say about my country of choice? About me? Conveniently, political and public discourse very quickly converged on the issue of immigration (which shows every sign of staying in the spotlight under the current administration). As a Hillary supporter, not only was I, by osmosis, a “nasty” woman, but also that most dreaded scapegoat of all: an immigrant (my only somewhat confusing “advantage” being my Eastern European origins).

As an Eastern European, privileged, blonde-haired and blue-eyed white woman in a white collar job, I do not immediately pass for an immigrant—that is, until my speaking out loud opens the way for someone else to comment on my accent, to point out my foreign-ness. (Unfortunately, the people who would benefit the most from invisibility – children, pregnant and unwed women, “undocumented” individuals—are also the most visible in political speech and news cycles.) The blatant sexism and xenophobia of the discourse pouring out of our new ruling circles hit me hard, and made me reconsider the intersection of my identities as a woman and an immigrant. In effect, both categories – “woman” and “immigrant” are threatening as the “other.” They are also performative; Butler (1990) teaches us that much about gender. And what is an “immigrant” if not an identity

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performance? You learn to perform in an alien, dominant culture that is oblivious of your own, reinventing yourself linguistically, culturally, and biologically by adopting new patterns of thinking, new values, new behaviors, and even new diseases. (This applies to some degree to countless othered groups as well.)

Thus, I see immigration as an existential condition that can be experienced by non-immigrants as well to a larger or smaller extent any time they have to move through the world and adapt to a starkly different set of circumstances. Being a woman riding the various feminist waves over the course of one's lifetime can also prove to be alienating, frightening and transformative, requiring unlearning of old norms and learning of new ones, a degree of adaptability that appears extraordinary only insofar as one's self is supposed to stay stable and firm through all it. Carving your own identity as a feministx (my ad-hoc clumsy shortcut for an intersectional feminist) requires constantly re-negotiating your relationships with your patriarchs and with the others in your life, including the generations that will come after you—the children you may have or whom you may mentor.

I grew up with a dubious kind of communist feminism, in which Elena Ceaușescu, the wife of our “dear leader,” accumulated top fake accolades such as honorary STEM doctorates, and every woman was “empowered” to drive a tractor alongside men in order to contribute to the completion of our glorious communist party's five-year plan. I reached young adulthood in a decidedly anti-feminist atmosphere (pre-packaged with a rejection of Western cultural “nonsense”), and ended up being exposed to feminist scholarship during my U.S. studies as well as to what has been called “fourth wave” feminism in its online incarnation. The many feminisms and antifeminisms that washed through me have changed me as definitively as immigration has. My former anti-feminist self was unreflective, superficial, spasmodic in that it contracted its muscles infrequently and jerkily, without any conscious thought; my current self swings the other way and will stay so, insofar as I am able to predict my future. My mother and grandmothers were both feminist (they worked outside the home, had political awareness, and were paragons of strength in their own right) and exceptionally antifeminist (denying their own oppression and embracing patriarchal norms). This poem is very personal and self-referential, hinting at this journey, and acknowledging my mother and grandmothers as the precursors to my own contradictory stances on this issue. Perhaps instead of wishing my parents to read Beauvoir (1949), I should have pointed them to Butler (1990) and the performativity of gender; things being as they are, I accept that their views are the product of a bygone era and regime, and I relish their unconditional love. I accept that they made me who I am, but I am compelled to think about doing better: raising my daughter as an intersectional feminist who can understand history, immigration, and culture as an engaged and compassionate citizen, but without necessarily feeling torn between worlds.

Being a feminist must start with an honest acknowledgment of your various selves, including the past selves of your ancestors whose genetic burden you carry, and who are not insignificant when you are also an immigrant, or, by extension, a person of color or a member of any other(ed) group. Learning to accept the contradictory bundles of feminisms that allow you to be a realized individual in this world carries the obligation to imagine how a society inclusive of and fair to all

intersectional identities may look. In a political climate where sexism and xenophobia come as a package, feminism must be performed always, already, intersectionally.

References

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