

Intersectional Transgressions

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Every year our Mennonite denomination convenes an assembly for people of color in leadership roles throughout our church. “People of color” is a clumsy banner for us to gather under. Over the years we’ve heard African-Americans opt for blackness as a better name for their racial tradition—rather than “color” as a nonspecific description that ignores the specifics of their racialized history in the United States. Latinx members have explained that language and accents have been a mark of racialization beyond the purview of people who focus on categorizing identities according to phenotype. And the stories of Native Americans and Asian-Americans shared at our meetings have exposed the inadequacies of color as the only way we talk about how our identities differ from the dominant society. While we all have our qualms about being lumped together—as if our racial and ethnic differences from one another aren’t substantial—we relish our time together for dreaming and scheming about our church.

At our gathering this year, we wrote a letter—a letter to our church, to our people. We outlined the world as we see it from our vantage points and offered a vision for our denomination—guidance on who we want to be as a people committed to God’s redemption. The experiences of our lives and our faith coalesced into a line of sight, an angle of discernment. As we hashed out the themes and wording of the letter, we wondered about our purpose in drafting this type of document. What does such a letter do? What does it mean for all of us to come together as women and men, as queer and straight—all of us bringing our racial difference as part of how we name our hope for the church? To articulate an ecclesial hope that doesn’t ignore our various identities is vital to how we bear witness to the gospel, at home and abroad, to our neighbors near and far. Our letter testifies to our belonging in the church—and our belonging displays the breadth of the gospel’s invitation, because if we’re here, in the multiplicity of our identities, then there is room in the body of Christ for others like us.

There’s a long history in North America of groups writing statements like our letter. Last year Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the Combahee River Collective statement in her edited volume, *How*

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*We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective.*² Their document has given me a better sense for the purpose of the work of intersectional statements—that is, the insights from a group with minoritized identities converging into a collective word for the public. As Taylor explains in her introduction, “The Combahee women did not coin the phrase ‘intersectionality’—Kimberlé Crenshaw did so in 1989—but the CRC [Combahee River Collective] did articulate the analysis that animates the meaning of intersectionality, the idea that multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering” (4). The women of the CRC bear witness to the interconnected injustices of our world. Multiple identities intersect in each of their lives—“Black women could not quantify their oppression only in terms of sexism or racism, or of homophobia experienced as Black lesbians” (4). And those inseparable identities open up angles of vision onto a society in which all of us play a part. They see a world that all of us share, even if not all of us can see it due to our different vantage points. They “analyze the roots of Black women’s oppression under capitalism,” Taylor explains, “arguing for the reorganization of society based on the collective needs of the oppressed” (5). The intersectionality of their lives reveals the intricate web of oppression that undergirds our society. In her recollections as a coauthor of the Combahee document, Beverly Smith remarks, “we really worked and struggled to develop a political analysis that took into account the multifaceted aspects of our identities and of our conditions” (101).

I’m a Latinx man. I don’t share the black lesbian identity of the women who were part of the Combahee River Collective. But their statement resonates with parts of my world; their words unmask social forces that have affected my family and neighbors, my people. This is the power of intersectionality, the strength of an intersectional vision. It exposes what’s wrong with our shared world, a world that affects everyone—all of us bound up together in a web of oppressions, some of us benefiting from those oppressions while others of us suffer, and all of us involved in the flows of power that structure our lives. Intersectional visioning discerns a liberative future for all of society: “if you could free the most oppressed people in society,” Taylor writes, “then you would have to free everyone” (5). The promise of intersectionality is a collective vision that outlines how we get free while inviting others to join in the struggle for liberation. As the Combahee Collective puts it in their statement, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (23).

To center their own experiences of oppression doesn’t mean that the Combahee women were sectarian—as if their statement was only for themselves, as if their statement outlined the formation of a private club. Instead, they offered

² Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2017).

a vision for a movement, an invitation to people who don't share their same identities. They envisioned a coalition organized around their struggle for justice. Taylor criticizes people who use identity politics as a form of exclusion, as a strategy of disempowerment. "For some the notion of identity politics seems to be that unless you suffer a particular kind of oppression, that you have no role in the struggle against it," she observes. "That if you don't have that experience, then you really have no role" (62). That's not the Combahee Collective outlook. As Barbara Smith—a coauthor of the Collective's statement—explains in her conversation with Taylor, "The only way that we can win—and before winning, the only way we can survive is by working with each other, and not seeing each other as enemies" (64). As black women, the Collective cast a vision for their own freedom, a liberation for themselves that would involve the creation of a new world for everyone.

As Mennonites of color, at our recent gathering we also produced an intersectional statement—centered on our own lives yet inviting others to join our vision for our denomination.³ We began with ourselves, with the world as we experience it: "We must listen to our incarnational truth," our letter states. There's a truth in our bodies—God speaking to us through our racialized experiences. The word *incarnational* draws from our Christian theological tradition while borrowing from feminism: "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting," wrote Simone de Beauvoir.⁴ We listen to what we've come to know through the conditions of our lives—and we speak that truth because there is strength in our bodies, our lives bearing witness to the sustaining power of God. As we dwell in our incarnational truth, we recognize that each of our lives contains multiple identities. We cannot be reduced to our racial differences, for example. And the maneuverings of our ecclesial politics has prioritized our racial identities over other parts of us—for example, our sexualities. "For too long in our churches we've forced people to deny pieces of who they are for the sake of unity, rendering them invisible," we announce in our statement. "We choose instead to see and value the *imago dei* in all people." We don't want to be fragmented for the purposes of denominational unity—as church leaders attribute value to racial difference while pretending our sexualities don't exist, because they would prefer Mennonites of color to be committed to their established heteronormative agenda.

Audre Lorde named this reality better than anyone else: "As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a

3 <http://mennoniteusa.org/news/hope-for-the-future-2018-participants-release-open-letter/>.

4 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), quoted in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossings Press, 2007 [1984]), 113.

woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression,” she wrote in her book *Sister Outsider*, “I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self.”⁵ This is a self-destructive way to live, Lorde explained, and it diminishes the strength and gifts we can bring to our communities. “My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly,” she expounded, “allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definitions.” That’s the reality we want, as Mennonites of color—a denominational structure that lets our incarnational truths and gifts empower our church’s struggle for God’s justice, the gospel of Christ’s peace, without denying our wholeness, the intersections of identities that converge in our lives. “We have a powerful peace and justice witness,” the letter declares. “But we must be willing to reach across faith, social class and ideological lines to partner with others.” The reach of our mutual belonging reveals our commitment to the reach of the gospel. Like the Combahee River Collective statement, as Mennonites of color our statement invites others to struggle with us for another world, a gospel that makes room for all of our identities. Our vision is an invitation for solidarity—to work side by side as a way to welcome God’s redemption for all of us.

At the end *How We Get Free*, Taylor invites Alicia Garza—community organizer and co-creator of #BlackLivesMatter—to reflect on black feminist movements today, in the wake of the Combahee River Collective. Garza focuses on a dynamic we face in our efforts at intersectional organizing—that is, what to do about people who don’t share our same minority oppressions? “I think what we are grappling with at this time and what Combahee makes me think about now is that that was such a powerful statement of unity and clarity about what brings us together, even though we don’t all live the same life” (168). We don’t live the same life. And there’s a temptation, in our organizing around identity politics, to narrow who belongs in our intersectional group—who is welcome at the table as we discern our survival strategies in the face of social forces that diminish our lives. But the call is to discover solidarities—as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes in her 2016 book, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, “Solidarity is standing in unity with people even when you have not personally experienced their particular oppression.”⁶ Solidarity invites intersectional transgressions, a sense of belonging where we share life even though we don’t have the same lives.

5 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 120.

6 Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), 215.

In terms of my denomination, this is a live conversation for Mennonites of color as we debate whether to have white allies at our yearly meeting. The same is the case for the annual Mennonite Women in Leadership Project gathering as they consider the place of male feminists at their table.⁷ Garza asks the question this way: “And so what does it mean for us then to be in deep and principled relationship with each other?” It’s obvious to her that we need people beyond our identity groups at our tables—and not just at our tables, but to develop deep and principled relationships. “[O]ur movements can’t only be composed of the people who are most disenfranchised,” she continues. “Our movements also have to be composed of people from across the class spectrum and people who also have power.” An intersectional movement liberates everyone from the racism and sexism and heteronormativity that holds all of us in bondage, even the people whose identities benefit from the current social arrangement, the distribution of resources and power in this country. In our struggle for a new world, we need movements that compel people who benefit from the present configuration of this world to abandon it, to jump ship, to betray white heteronormative patriarchy. As Garza puts it, “You’ve got to break some of their folks off and be like, ‘Well, which side are you actually on?’”⁸

When white allies abandon this world, we need to have space for them in the new one we’re building together. I know that patriarchy (and Latino machismo) has ensnared my life. And as I struggle to get free—for my sake as well as for the women around me—I’m reaching for hands to pull me into another world. This work will risk the vulnerability of the borders of our groups as we invite identity trespassers and as we discern whose hands to reach for in our struggle for wholeness—wholeness for ourselves and for the people around us, for others in our lives.

Gloria Anzaldúa—the Chicana poet and activist—talked about this work as the labor of bridge building. “To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded.”⁹ To be church together—in all of our diversity, with all of our identities—is to create spaces in our world to risk loving each other, to risk spiritual intimacies, transgressions across identities, as God’s love gathers us into coalitions that are bearing a new world.

⁷ <http://mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/peacebuilding/women-in-leadership-project/>

⁸ Taylor, *How We Get Free*, 168.

⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 246.