

preface to the 2009 edition

A challenge to single-issue politics: reflections from a decade later

IN THE DECADE SINCE the initial release of *Exile and Pride*, I've often been asked, "What do you want readers to take away from your book?" The answer has become one of my activist mantras: "I want nondisabled progressive activists to add disability to their political agenda. And at the same time I want disability activists to abandon their single-issue politics and strategies." My answer remains as true in 2009 as it was in 1999.

It's only been ten years, but I must say I'm impatient for my mantra to lose its relevancy. How long must we wait, for instance, before ADAPT and Critical Resistance join forces? As an identity-based, disability rights organization, ADAPT organizes direct-action protests to shut down nursing homes and stop the institutionalization of disabled people. In the last two decades, hundreds, if not thousands, of disability activists have been arrested while blockading doors, occupying offices, and stopping traffic. During the same period of time, Critical Resistance has organized grassroots opposition to the prison-industrial complex, rejecting prison reform as a viable strategy and building support for prison abolition. How would a vision of liberation be reshaped if these two groups understood and acted upon the connections between

different ways of locking people up and between the different institutions profiting from these incarcerations?

Unfortunately, not many disability or nondisabled progressive groups engage in multi-issue thinking and organizing that deeply embed disability politics into an agenda that includes race, class, gender, and sexuality. At an ADAPT demo recently, I saw a flyer that read “You think prison is bad, try a nursing home.” In one simple slogan, disability activists advanced a hierarchy of institutions and oppressions, defined disability as their sole focus, and revealed profound ignorance about the ways being locked up in prisons cause bone-crushing damage, particularly in communities of color. This slogan and the disability politics behind it leave little chance for making connections and addressing the daily complexities of folks who know the grief and outrage of both prisons and nursing homes.

I’d like to introduce disability activists to prison activists, to stories of solitary confinement, rape, and death row, to the rampant injustice of the so-called criminal justice system and the staggering incarceration rates for Black and Latino/a men, women, and trans people. In turn, I’d like prison activists to hear disability stories about nursing homes, group homes, psych wards, and state-run hospitals, about neglect, punishment, rape, abuse of power, about the many pressures that force disabled people into institutions and trap them there. The ensuing conversations across communities and issues—hours of talk about violence, isolation, forced sterilization, medical experimentation, institutional cruelty and indifference—would be painful and vitally important, exposing the interlocking power structures that both cause disability and lock up disabled people.

Through the work and words of feminists of color in the 1980s and early ’90s, I learned the multi-issue politics that inform *Exile and Pride*. In important ways this book wouldn’t exist without

the writings of Cherríe Moraga and Chrystos, Nellie Wong and Barbara Smith, Angela Davis and Beth Brant, among others. Today many activists talk about multiple identities, intersectional politics, and integrated analysis as if these ideas have always been at the core of progressive thought. But in 1977 when the Combahee River Collective wrote its well-known statement, those women were declaring a profound truth—brand-new to many activists and at the same time rooted in the work of earlier Black feminists:

[W]e are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.*

My political education started here with feminists of color insisting upon the many ways in which patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism define, impact, reinforce, and contradict each other. I can't even count the lessons I learned from them about institutional power and personal accountability, the twine of oppression and privilege. Amidst all this, I also began to reframe my life as a disabled person, the blunt grind of bullying and shame slowly turning into a nuanced identity connected to political understanding and action. Audre Lorde's matter-of-factness about her vision impairment and ferocity about cancer's connection to social injustice, as well as Essex Hemphill's unflinching analysis of and activism around AIDS, prompted my initial questioning and curiosity about bodily difference *as* political. The revelation that my cerebral palsy might be something other than pain, grief, and burden split me open. Audre and Essex did this for me while never directly using the words *disability* or *ableism* but deeply embedding

*Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (1977) in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981), 210.

issues of bodily difference into their braids of racism, homophobia, classism, and sexism. *Exile and Pride* builds upon those politics.



Twenty-six years since first picking up that groundbreaking anthology of writings by women of color called *This Bridge Called My Back* and ten years since the initial release of *Exile and Pride*, I—like all of us—am practicing my politics during a protracted time of war. Even as pundits and politicians claim that the US war in Iraq might soon be coming to an end, war in Afghanistan is escalating. There is no foreseeable end to the war on terror, the war on drugs, the many wars of occupation funded by the United States. We live in a time of unrelenting war.

The work of stopping US bombs from being dropped and bringing the US troops home, of ending war and creating lasting peace with justice requires a fundamental commitment to multi-issue organizing. At an anti-war protest not long ago, I saw a placard announcing “An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind.” This slogan is one of many that turns disability into a metaphor, reinforces that disability means broken and is fundamentally undesirable, and ignores the multitude of actual lived disability experiences connected to war. For folks who know blindness/disability as a consequence of crushing military force, the “eye for an eye” slogan offers a superficial rationale for nonviolence but no lasting justice. In response, I’d like to stand next to those anti-war activists and hold a placard that reads “Another cripple for peace,” or maybe, “Blindness is sexy; military force is not.”

Because disability is one of the major consequences of war, we need an anti-war politics that doesn’t transform disability into a symbol of either patriotism or tragedy, a politics that thinks hard about disability. Who gets killed, and who becomes disabled? Who profits from that killing and disabling? Whose bodies are used as weapons, and whose are treated as expendable? What happens to the countless people shattered, broken, burned, terrorized?

How is wartime violence brought home, in which nightmares and flashbacks, in what rage and addiction? All the answers depend upon naming disability and committing to a multi-layered analysis of how white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, and ableism work in concert.

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Building a politics that reflects all the multiplicity in our lives and in the world isn't optional, but rather absolutely necessary. *Exile and Pride* is one small part of that building project. When I'm asked, "Tell me, what is your book about?" I always pause. The request seems straightforward. But how do I sum up a book that ranges from the clearcuts of Oregon to the history of the freak show, from the complexities of queer rural working-class organizing to the disability politics of sexual objectification? Inevitably, I answer, "Home." I mean place, body, identity, community, family as home. I mean the hay pastures, trees, rocks, beaches, abandoned lots, kitchen tables, and sunflowers out back that have held and sustained us. I mean how we have fled from and yearned toward home. In the end, I mean a deeply honest multi-issue politics that will make home possible.