

FEMINISM IN TRANSLATION

An Autonomous-Feminist Statement: The Challenge for Developing Community in *La Casa de las Diferencias*¹

Encuentro Feminista Autónomo

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Abstract

This autonomous-feminist statement is a collective work born from a gathering at the Autonomous Feminist Encounter [Encuentro Feminista Autónomo] in Mexico City in 2009. This piece gives a historical review of so-called autonomous feminism in Latin America and poses a definition and vision of its praxis, taking into account the socio-political-economic context in Latin America in the early 2000s. This article also recognizes feminist groups that started the critique of hegemonic feminist praxis in the region.

It has been a long path to reach where we are today. The feminism that unites us has been forged by many hands, actions, and dreams. Thanks to those who worked before us, we know today what we want and what we do not want.

Feminist autonomy does not have one, single beginning. Its genealogy is constructed from the past and the future, from previous history, and from the acts and choices we make every day. Utopia is constructed in our present. It is nourished from every individual and collective act through which—on the basis of what has already been done—we are capable of generating our own idea of the world and the necessary practices and principles to transform it.

Our feminist autonomy is a posture toward the world rather than a collection of univocal precepts. Autonomy is not nourished by dogmas or mandates, because it escapes all regulation and all attempts to remove us from our singularity and responsibility as historical subjects committed to other forms of doing and being in the intimate, private, and public spheres.

The multiplicity of experiences that cross us—the ones gathered here—demonstrate what we are talking about.

We have arrived at this living space of autonomous feminism by different paths. Some of us later, some earlier, some through labyrinths in which we were lost for a time. . . . until the atmosphere of self-critique and critique of the world condensed and passed through us like a lightning bolt. Thus, by the most unforeseen ways and thanks to accumulated experience, we have been able to make a radical and mature critique not only of the world we live in, but also of the politics necessary to change it.

We acknowledge this multiplicity of experiences and knowledges as one of our greatest potentials, while at the same time determinedly recognizing the productions and actions that unify us. We agree on some minimal common ground that makes us feel called upon and contained by the political positioning that we have come to call autonomous feminism.

In our genealogy we collect every form of active resistance from our Indigenous and Afro-descendant female ancestors: from the legacy of the radical feminism of the 1970s; the early experiences of consciousness-raising groups;² the practices of *affidamento*,³ and creative authorship among Italian women from difference feminism; the situated, decentered, and antiracist feminist movements of Latin American, Chicano, and women of color in the US that have been continued in Latin America and the Caribbean; the contributions of feminist lesbians struggling against the regime of compulsory heterosexuality that oppresses all women; the recognition of women as a political category—and not as a natural one, as we have been taught by materialist feminists. Much closer, we are inheritors of that part of the 1970s feminist generation that during the late 1980s did not want to abandon their aspirations for a radical transformation of reality, and warned of the dangers of the new alliance between a significant portion of feminists and international cooperation in the form of the United Nations system, the state, and its institutions.

In the early production of *Las Cómplices*, *Movimiento Feminista Autónomo*, and *Feminismo Popular* from Chile, *Mujeres Creando* from Bolivia, and *Atem* from Argentina, we recognize the first concrete contributions to the definition of basic postulates. Those productions articulated the first experiences and projects that were later gathered under the umbrella of “autonomous feminism” during the VII Encuentro Feminista LAC [Seventh Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting] in 1996, giving rise to the first autonomous-feminist declaration: *Permanencia Voluntaria en la Utopía* [Voluntary Permanence in Utopia].

Many colleagues—forged from the experiences articulated at the Encuentro [Meeting] in Cartagena, Chile—have reunited here today to continue constructing, with new generations of autonomous feminists, the current challenges posed by new forms of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, ethnocentrism, and the heterosexual regime. We acknowledge the role throughout our history of those collective spaces and projects that have not only continued the legacy, but have also been actively involved in the construction and constant revision of the discursive and activist foundations of the autonomous proposal, among them *Las Próximas*, *Las Chinchetas*, *Las Clorindas*, *Enlace Lésbico*, and *Memoria Feminista*.

From these multiple foundations and paths, today we can claim that autonomous feminism is an ethical, political, and transformative proposal of the *whole world*, by women, for women, and for all humanity.

Above all, autonomy is always an act of profound dissidence against any logic of dominance; it is counter-hegemonic, it is relational. Our thought seeks to dismantle the prisons of hegemonic paradigms—all of them patriarchal, Western, and capitalist—that are capable of maintaining any thought within the limit of profit.

We have been autonomous feminists in relation to those political practices that in every new situation have tried to adapt feminism to a pragmatic reasoning that is willing to give up the attempt to change *the whole world*, in exchange for an inclusion that will always be partial and for privileges that will always be those of sex, class, race, sexuality, origin, and normativity. The feminism that unites us is recognized in every gesture of radical opposition to the countless and interconnected forms of subordination and

colonization of our bodies and subjectivities. It is recognized in each small attempt to produce, in the here and now, new forms of life—distant from those expected for women and oppressed groups.

While observing the new international context and its local manifestations and particularities, we—those gathered here at this Autonomous Feminist Encounter—highlight the re-intensification of the consequences of neoliberalism in the lives of millions of women and poor people of the world. We denounce the progressive militarization, the increased structural violence, and the vulnerability of a large portion of the population; the irresponsible looting and privatization of land, water, and natural resources; the dominance of a normalizing and mercantilist science in the service of big capital; the prevalence of thinking that is efficiency-based, demagogic, and quantitative; and the co-optation, persecution, and attempts to annihilate the most radical discourses from movements and transformative proposals undertaken by governments, international cooperation, and transnational spaces, where an expert elite, separated from movements and subaltern life, produces the hegemonic discourses, formulas, and agendas for local policies.

Multiple identities live within our bodies: worker, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, *mestiza*, lesbian, poor, peasant, immigrant. . . . We are both held and oppressed by each of these identities. What brings us together is not an identity, but a political body, a memory of grievances. Our shared subordination has been marked in our bodies. That unerasable mark constrains us to a specific place in social life. We are not women by choice; woman is the name of a violated body, forged in fire. Woman is the specific place to which patriarchy, and every system of oppression, has condemned us. Our feminist politics is not, thus, simply oppositional nor does it seek recognition. We work daily to confront the internal and external chains that maintain us in those places designated for us by the web of power. We are in the process of healing from patriarchy, as well as from the binary, essentialist, and hegemonic ideology that we carry inside ourselves. We begin from our bodies, which are our political territories, in order to involve ourselves in processes of decolonization. At the same time, we warn that colonization has to do not only with the presence of the invader throughout the lands of Aby Yala,⁴ but also with the internalization of the master and that logic of understanding the world.

Our feminism believes in the construction of movements, it sticks its feet in the mud until it no longer lets us breathe. Under the certainty of our convictions, we gather with those who, like us, want to change the world, but also with those who haven't yet found their own strength to start this journey. We want to reach out to them as well, and tell them our greatest hopes. Autonomous feminism is not withdrawn; it cannot seclude and isolate itself trying to keep a purity that does not exist. The value and strength of our convictions are at play in our audacity, our irreverence, and in our constant capacity to remake ourselves. We are not to be found in every space—some of them are so flawed that they have no opening for action. . . . but the streets, they are ours! The neighborhood, the commune, the parks, the corridors of the university, the collective. . . they are ours! There we go with (our) tenacity and flaws. . . and also our hopes.

We are neither inside nor outside. We are on the border. We are ex-centric!

We propose, build, and transmit the world that we want, recognizing and assuming our responsibility as part of it. We are aware that we are crossed by institutions and that a complete *outside* is not a place; everyone is still *inside*. We barely transform the marginal space to which we have been confined, a place for experimentation and escape. From the periphery we make a celebration for imagination, creativity, pleasure, and encounter. . . . Laughter is our best tool.

We dare ourselves to live inebriated, to think of other ways to inhabit the world, while our laughter throws darts at the regimes of mandatory heterosexuality, the monogamous family, and ethnocentric, racist, capitalist patriarchy. We make mistakes, we fall and we rise again; with the pain of these lessons, we forge the happiness that we build and inhabit. We are always in process, always in transit. We gather with others, we make strategic and contingent connections, always guided by our principles and ethics. We know the line between trying to establish alliances and co-optation. As fugitives of hegemonic logics, we know very well when it is time to slip through the cracks of our dreams.

We walk five steps and it looks as if we are back at the same place . . . our footprints trace the spiral that our ancestors have already drawn since ancient times. There is nothing new, but so much beauty! So much beauty barely seen, barely imagined, barely walked through.

The world we want is the one that we make every day when we share our tasks and gifts, when we recognize the wonder in each one of us and contribute in order for it to keep growing and surprise us. The world we make acknowledges authority in the capacity of each of us to have authorship; the allowance for authority has a double side. We recognize in every mother a pile of treasures that are the foundation ensuring the creation of the new generation; but we also recognize the unprecedented in each new being, in each new journey. Freshness and vitality are the virtues that newborns remind us of and pass on to us. The girl reminds us of what we have forgotten. Memory does not accumulate linearly, and each new generation and subject, one by one, has her destiny in her hands, and will learn to interpret the experiences and creations that came before her. She will use them to interpret her present, she will listen to stories, and with them dream of and build other worlds. She will recognize many mothers, many legacies, and her autonomy will lead her to build something new with all of it, something that will be partly ours, but that exceeds us. Each daughter, each new generation will have to learn to *bring the world into the world*.⁵ Grateful, she will follow her own path. After recognizing who she is, she will know how to make her contribution with what has been given to her.

From autonomous feminism we have learned that politics is neither the administration nor redistribution of privileges. When politics is transformed into a traffic of influence, concession of favors, management of pardons or permits, a pursuit of personal and group welfare, it loses all its meaning and value. Gender technocracy is an invention of states and of the supra-state authorities that define them; the management of gender is what institutions do with our struggles. It is not our business to make the state work well! We build community, we build movements. The state has one role to play, and we have another: to fight it. The duty of the state is to manage what is instituted, but we as a movement are the guarantee of the permanent destabilization of its flawed structures. If institutionalization is inevitable, our role is indispensable for the dislocation and creation of cracks and escape routes within the performance of power. Without our action, there is no possible way out, there is no history.

Understanding this, feminist autonomy chooses subalternity, and counter-hegemony. Our dreams don't fit in this world or in the logics that sustain it. We don't want to humanize the inhuman, we don't pretend to do "the possible," because it was shown long ago that "the possible" is unjust, insufficient, and reproduces the same thing. The lives we build are a danger to compulsive and necessary normativity. We don't want to be "included." We reject "normalization" because it is a social and political disease that kills dreams and revolutions.

We are the darkness and barbarism of the modern world; we are a source of alternative energy. We love the night and we use it to reconnect reason, passion, and

poetry—detached from one another for so long. Our hearts beat to the rhythm of the universe, we are here, we are our steps, we are what we do with what has been done to us. Our bodies do not condemn us, they are the result of the experiments of reason, they have been flogged, colonized, impoverished, racialized, gendered, heterosexualized . . . but, wow, how much willingness and love we carry inside.

An inexhaustible energy shapes us, re-establishes us, shelters us. The breath comes to us from remote times, the breath comes to us from the encounter with others. We are past, present, and future, all in the same wide space: a space that is under permanent construction, in a state of permanent change; a space where we act, *creacionamos*,⁶ and activate our dreams of making this world into another one.

Notes

1 This article was first published as: Encuentro Feminista Autónomo. 2010. “Una Declaración Feminista Autónoma El Desafío De Hacer Comunidad En La Casa De Las Diferencias.” *Debate Feminista* (41): 202–07.

2 Consciousness-raising or awareness-raising was a form of political activism pioneered by New York Radical Women as part of second-wave feminism in the United States in the late 1960s. It originally consisted of a group of women who met up in a space, such as a library or a living-room, in order to call attention to and discuss a struggle or concrete issue in their lives. Such encounters were meant to help one another to become politically conscious and to get a better understanding of their oppression by meeting without interference from the presence of men.

3 *Affidamento*, or entrustment, is a practice started by the Italian feminist movement from the 1970s (within which the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective had a central role) that draws attention to the relationship between women. *Affidamento* is about building trust, supporting, counseling, and guiding one another, but also about sharing personal dreams and projects in order to achieve political aims and face patriarchal power. This practice recognizes that, rather than the process of identification, it is the differences between women that are the most generative qualities of their personal and political relationship.

4 The term *Abya Yala*, from the Guna language: “land of fertile blood,” is used as an alternative name to refer to the territory named (Latin) America by European colonizers.

5 From the Spanish “traer al mundo el mundo,” a phrase whose origin within difference feminism highlights the feminine experience, with the aim of including it in the universal understanding of the world.

6 Create while acting at the same time.

Encuentro Feminista Autónomo [The Autonomous Feminist Encounter] was a gathering of Latin American and Caribbean activists and thinkers that took place in Mexico City in 2009, days before the Eleventh Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting [XI Encuentro Feminista LAC] in the same city. The Encounter gathered Indigenous, Afro-Descendant, and mixed-race feminist activists who critiqued hegemonic feminism present on the continent. Some of the participants were Ochy Curiel, Yuderkys Espinosa, Julieta Paredes, Francesca Gargallo, Melisa Cardoza, Victoria Aldunate, Norma Mogrovejo, among others.

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