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“Us Against Them, Us Against Us”
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This year’s conference occurs as pictures of presumed proud, masculine, and heterosexual Iraqi men stand and bend – naked -- under the presumed authority of a butch white American woman. The sexual humiliation of Iraqi men, from the images of an American doctor using tongue depressors to penetrate Saddam Hussein’s face to recent photos of Iraqi detainees with their asses in the air, remind us of the central place of sex, shame and bodies in high stakes power struggles. Though killing is the daily routine of the American government, it is the sexual and gendered humiliation of Iraqi men, not their death, mutilation and burning from bombs that has caused the loudest mainstream critique of Bush’s war. Americans are preoccupied with humiliation, intimate invasions of privacy, and attacks on sexual and masculine self-respect.

With the noise of American bombings ringing in our ears, though adjusted to appropriate listening levels by our remote controls, and snapshots of naked Iraqi bodies circulating between our commercial breaks, we must understand our work and our goals as broader than breast self-exams, STDs, smoking and heart disease. We must find connections between our work and other sexualized violence. Our challenge is to put our specific health concerns into a larger social change context. I think our community knows the world is unsafe and discriminatory against them so our messages of telling them to get healthy and change their behavior so they can live longer and healthier – in an unjust and unsafe world – rings hollow. We can’t pretend that living a healthier life in the face of adversity is easy or even logical. So, let’s stop pretending it is. Yes, I want every queer person to live as long and as well as possible but we are battling some huge challenges – economics, discrimination, racism, sexism, and my health messages tend to sound absurd if they aren’t in that context.

Authorities argue absurdly that the events of abuse in Iraq are shocking, isolated and misrepresentative of American culture. Besides the fact that sexual humiliation, violence, rape, and abuse has long been a strategy of war, Americans know all too well that soldiers' recent documentation of sexual abuses are only glimpses into an American culture that is utterly saturated and permeated with sexual humiliations and abuse. Americans experience and perpetrate sexual humiliation and violence in doctors' offices, on playgrounds, in bathrooms, on shop floors, in corner offices, at home, in courtrooms, at school, in church basements and around water coolers. We Americans struggle with each other at the site of our bodies - as schoolgirls, priests, welfare workers, prom dates, supreme-court justices, parents, leftist lovers and Christian fundamentalists.

The current battle we find ourselves in -- over bodies is old -- it is rooted in histories of colonialism, slavery, indentured servitude, and war after war after war. What has changed is the entrance of corporate power onto the scene. Stepping onto the battleground, with fervor perhaps surpassing religious missionaries, are corporations. In a global economy that is based primarily on consumption, our bodies' desires, cravings, hungers, anxieties, hormones, and depressions have become the preoccupation of pharmaceutical companies, corporate food engineers, news reporters, the World Bank, and other powerful institutions.

The issues that I and I know many of you, have been working on for years have death, pleasure, and humiliation at their core. AIDS. CANCER. ABORTION. And now something called LESBIAN HEALTH. And at the core of these are bodies, sex, nakedness, and power -- at their intersection our work begins.

This luncheon is supposed to be about myths and the myth of the lesbian may be the only myth I could actually help dispel during this conference. I actually get paid to be a lesbian and of course years ago that seemed like a dream come true. I wish I could tell you I know more about what being a lesbian means than I could then. I know how much I don't know now. I find the language, identity, space and history are keeping us more apart than they are bringing us closer. That in our zeal to define this thing called lesbian health

we might actually be creating more problems, keeping more people out than we do bring in. Our quest for mapping the problems, desire for common language, for coherency, all of this has the potential to turn people off from us and our work. And the funny thing is when my organization was formed with the word lesbian in it's title 13 years ago it was a radical notion and the problem was funders and the mainstream and closeted clients and the beginnings of caller ID. Now, in every generation of our community I am confronted by more and more folks who do not define themselves as lesbian and the assumptions they make – some right some wrong – about those of us who use this language is keeping them away.

In Chicago, I am proud to say we have rich and vibrant queer cultural spaces. These are the places that we all probably have in our communities and we need to open ourselves up to them to be taught by them to be influenced by them and allow the incoherency, inconsistencies, differences that are flourishing to make our work go farther.

Feminist are the gender experts. We are and always have been on the side of gender and sexual minorities. Marginalized gender is the concern of feminists. We opened the door and we cannot shut it now.

Our striving to create a coherent and respectable picture of “lesbian” for the larger outside world doesn't do us justice and doesn't do justice to the real issues at play in our health. We have organized ourselves around an identity that is not easily defined by who we have sex with or what we look like or what we call ourselves. Our issues are about how my gender presentation and my sexual attractions and my sexual practices and my histories with all of it get rolled together when we try to say “lesbian” and now all of it is once again invisible.

Though we face new struggles we cannot understand ourselves to be alone historically or currently with our desire to intervene in the battle. We cannot define ourselves as isolated from other activists, other times, other battles. While our struggles certainly have unique moments, qualities, feeling, and ideas, our bodies, like other bodies struggle to wrestle a definition of ourselves, our well-being, our value,

our freedom of movement, our intimate connections away from the will of others, restrictive language and ideas and parasitic institutions.

We also cannot understand ourselves to be immune from perpetrating abuse, domination, violence either in deed or through language. As people who struggle over power, over definitions, over strategies, we wield power, we redefine the limits of the battlefield, who is included and excluded, what the terms of our debates are, our values. We are involved in the risky project of reconfiguring shame, exclusion and humiliation.

Our work is messy and complicated and incoherent and changing and important and life and death and sex and blood and guts. And we have to keep fighting everyday and we have to get over our personal myths and stereotypes and histories and baggage and be willing to do whatever needs to be done or learned or experienced to be the life we were meant to be.

We are joined together by our deviance and difference and somewhere in our struggle for human rights we ended up in matching suits on the steps of the courthouses in Massachusetts signing a contract with the state. The potential impact of these images and this work could be detrimental to what we here in this room have been trying to achieve. I believe these images and this work may very well drive away those we are trying to reach. These images ignore our pervertedness, our gender fluidity, the parts that make us interesting and different. Our sisters and brothers who do not look or act the part of cover stories on gay marriage will be pushed farther and farther away from us and our work and our goals. And we have to stop building walls or language or priorities that exclude so many. Because while I have all the trappings my privilege can afford...I am still a pervert...you are still a pervert... our work must attend to this if we are to lessen the everyday humiliations and the death all around us.