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The Scholar & Feminist XXX:

Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms

2005 Conference Transcripts

PANEL 4

WOMEN'S CULTURE:
MEDIA, ART AND MODES OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Ann Cvetkovich: I was very delighted to be asked to moderate because I come to this panel as much as a fan as anything else. So I'm very excited to get to have a conversation with the other panelists. I also realize, looking at the film this morning and thinking about the fact that we are having this conversation as part of *The Scholar & Feminist*, just as the retrospective was going by, I was remembering that for me, *The Scholar & Feminist Conference on Sexuality* in 1982 was really one of the formative moments for my feminist career.

I can't imagine where my work would be without that work and its controversy, and kind of think that that's probably where I first would have known about Dorothy Allison's work, is through her presence at that conference. So it seems especially appropriate, actually, to get to do this in relation to that -- an additional honor.

We're going to talk about art, but we're going to talk about art in a way that connects to all the other things that

we've been talking about already today. I am going to introduce each of our panelists and then I have a series of questions for them, but we are kind of free-forming it here because the idea is to have a conversation, rather than to have formal presentations.

And you should just know that as accomplished as all of us are speakers, there's something slightly nerve-wracking about having to do it that way because I don't know what's going to happen. And they haven't necessarily prepared, so there will be that air of excitement and possibility and -- who knows what's going to happen here?

And we will also have plenty of time to hear from you. We have until 4:00 P.M., so we will probably take up the first half of that time with our conversation here, to get things going. And then, turn it over to you to ask for the questions and make further comments. [Bios are available at <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/sfxxx/contribu.htm>]

There was some talk about whether people would show or demonstrate their work. And then, I realized, we should begin in some way, with some art. And so, I asked Meena if she would be willing to begin, just by reading a poem for us.

Meena Alexander: It's a very great honor to be here, and a pleasure. I'm sitting between Staceyann and Dorothy -- what could be more wonderful, to start with? And I also want to say,

my daughter who is a first-year Barnard student, is here. And also, that my first formal presentation in this country was done at The Scholar & the Feminist, many years ago. And so, here is a poem which Staceyann told me to read. It's called "The Color of Home" and it's addressed to Lorca:

I met you by Battery Park where the bridge once was. / Invisible
it ran between the towers. / What made you follow me, O ghost in
the black cutaways? / Dear Mr. Lorca I address you, / filled
with a formal feeling. / You were tongue tied on the subway till
a voice cried out. / Thirty-fourth Street, last stop on the D. /
It's the Empire State, our tallest again, / time to gather
personal belongings, figure out redemption. / You leaned into my
ribs muttering: / Did you hear that, you seller of salt / and
gatherer of ash just as your foremothers were? / How the world
goes on and on. / Have you ever seen a bullfight? / What do you
have strapped to your back? / The quieter, under your breath: /
Let's survive the last stop together. / I knew a Hindu ballerina
once, / nothing like you, a quick, delicate thing. / I walked
with her by the river / those months when English fled from me /
and the young men of Manhattan/ broke cherry twigs and scribbled
on my skin / till one cried out - I am the boy killed by dark
water, / surely you know me? / Then bolt upright you whispered:
/ Why stay on this island? / See how it's ringed by water and

flame? / You who have never seen Granada - / tell me, what is
the color of home?

Thank you.

(applause)

Ann Cvetkovich: So, my first question is this -- what is
an artist? And the reason I ask is because I'd like to begin
with the premise that, in the words of Deb Margolin, a very
wonderful performance artist -- creativity is our birthright; it
belongs to all of us. These are people who have chosen, in some
way, to make creativity a part of the work they do, in many
cases, as professionals.

And I'm interested in asking them what they have to say
about what an artist is, because I think feminism has very often
transformed our notions of that term. I'm interested in whether
people claim it; if they have ambivalence about it. Sometimes
people substitute other words like -- cultural producer.

Sometimes art is in danger of being given less prominence
in relation to questions of activism, although I'm assuming that
none of us here would want to see those terms severed from one
another. So there are a variety of ways, I think, in which what
it means to be an artist gets transformed in relation to the
many different kinds of activities that people do.

So I'd love to hear what you have to say about that.

Staceyann Chin: You're looking directly at me.

Ann Cvetkovich: You know what, I want you to answer this question because in your bio notes also, you said -- in addition to wanting to have time to do all these fantastic-sounding projects, you wanted to have time to see your sister and to breathe.

Staceyann Chin: Anyone who knows about this work knows that it's not 9:00 to 5:00. I'm looking at faces I've seen in conferences across the country and in different places and looking at students -- the blue and the purple and the orange in their hair. So I know that they've made particular choices that at least, set them apart from the masses, so to speak.

This kind of work is ridiculous, to me, in my head. It takes up loads of time and takes up all kinds of energies that leave you with very little time to do laundry and sex -- those kinds of things.

(laughter)

But largely speaking, I'm not sure how I came to this term, feminist. I come from Jamaica where it couldn't be more homophobic or more misogynistic and all those kinds of things -- except it could be America, which is the same crap.

(laughter)

But as a small child, I used big words in correct ways, so people thought I was brilliant. And as a result, they shuffled you into the sciences because all brilliant people must be

shuffled towards science. So, I did my first degree in math, in biochemistry, math and science. And I ended up being like a scientist at 22, and thinking -- maybe this is not what I wanted to do.

Maybe I wanted to read Toni Morrison some more and talk about it some more, in some places with red chairs and panel discussions and so on.

(laughter)

And so I really didn't come to the term, feminist. I knew that my brother and his penis got way more power and attention than I did. And I held it against my brother, until I figured out it was a system that held him prisoner too.

And so, I started arguing those kinds of things in the very small space of my home. And my mother was absent because she left, because of a whole range of things that happened with her. Poverty and the patriarchal society that she was born under, that she wanted to be a writer and she was bipolar and poor and all those kinds of things.

And she ended up with two children and no father to take care of them and so, her best choice to save herself was to run. But nobody explained those things, so you ended up hating this woman because she didn't stay. The pot keeps boiling and I turned 17 and I ran into Toni Morrison's Sula.

And all this time, I am battling through Merchant of Venice and all this stuff, and I knew I loved the sound of words and I liked T.S. Eliot. But I didn't quite see myself, but I knew that I liked the way words felt, rumbling about under my tongue.

So when I came upon Toni Morrison and I found Plath and all these women who say all these things for us throughout the ages. And I look at people who I know will say them for generations to come. And I knew that this was going to be a way of life.

And the word, feminist -- it probably fell on my head one day, I was sitting under a tree. It's kind of become like, my underwear. I wear it every day.

(laughter)

And I carry it with me, and I think we are in a critical space, but this will keep the conversation going. We are in a critical space, about the definition of feminism and where are we going to go with it. And now that it's kind of, maybe 30 or 40 years old, it's kind of grown up. The boobs are sagging a little bit.

What are we going to do with it now? And I was in Stockholm a couple of weeks ago, talking to the movement that they call the feminist movement in Stockholm. They are dealing with that, the context of feminism within the context of being queer and transgenderism.

And like, we have all these grown-up women, we have all these older women who, we've built the activism and feminism around being young and around being a certain way, and doing this. What are we going to do with these grown-up women who are feminists, and these young women who now want to wear high heels and push-up bras?

I mean, is that feminism too? I mean, is that all right? Or are we having a problem with that?

Tammy Rae Carland: I'll say something, since I'm an artist and I'm a professor of art and I feel I should answer this question -- and I have no idea how. But I guess what I would say -- and I teach in an art school, so my students are people who call themselves artists and do something that I didn't do for most of my life.

Well beyond having an MFA, I didn't have the courage to kind of really own that, for a variety of reasons that I'm sure we'll get to in this panel. But I would say, briefly, that art is language. It's a visual, spoken or heard or experienced language that transgresses kind of linear, oral or verbal language and linear history.

And it's a way of communicating and dialoguing. And so, to see an artist as somebody who is trying to nourish that kind of dialogue and that kind of practice -- again, it transcends, kind of how we learn through language. That's what I would say.

Dorothy Allison: This is almost like a pop quiz, these panels. What is an artist?

(laughter)

Ann Cvetkovich: It was a take-home quiz. I gave you the questions.

Dorothy Allison: Not completely, though, because she sent us all her questions, but there were 16 of them. And I had to do the laundry, and the dog died and things happened. But when I was looking at the list and it said -- what is an artist? And it said -- artist or cultural producer?

Cultural producer? The problem is that, the associations that I have with particular words, don't have much to do with me. I remember the term "cultural worker." I wore a badge, "Cultural Worker," back when I was in Necessary Bread and we were marching against nuclear activism.

We were antinuclear activists, I should say. At least I think that's what I was. But I don't relate to the word "artist." If I close my eyes and you say "artist" to me, I think -- Oscar Wilde in a scarf and a long coat, and a breeze and long-flowing locks.

I think, what's the thing, the woman, Georgia O'Keeffe, that painted the beautiful bones, flowers and bones. But mostly, I think of people with money and time and good health

and good teeth. And comfort, peace of mind. Deep curiosity, I'm sure; they must have all had deep curiosity.

But they had time to work it out. I've never had enough time in my life. Never. I have never thought of myself as an artist. I have somehow, by sheer stubborn perseverance, created an identify for myself, as a lesbian writer. But that gets pretty embattled too.

It's all about where you are right now and what I read last, and what I read last night were the lyrics to the song "In the Dirty South" by the Drive-By Truckers. You don't know the Drive-By Truckers. I know this.

You're a bunch of Yankee girls, right?

(laughter)

Who in here has ever heard the Drive-By Truckers? We date.

(laughter)

I was listening to these lyrics, because they are story songs. I mean, they're bad Southern rock and roll -- alt country. They actually got called alt country punk. Is that a category? Okay, I'm not an artist, I'm an alt country punk writer. And really, what I know about artists is that we all have stories.

We all have something vital, necessary -- it will kill us, if we don't find a way to express it. And what I know is that almost all the women in my family have had that kind of

maddening passion, and it killed most of them. Because there was no place for them to take their art, and nothing to be done with it except to go mad or slap their kids around.

Which is where it goes if it has no place to go. What I feel, as a feminist artist, is an enormous responsibility. Scary, scary, scary. Because I'm an old dyke and I ain't young and cute anymore. Yeah, I wear a pushup bra, but it's just to hold it in place where it used to be.

(laughter)

And I have a lot of stories pushing in me, but more and more difficulty getting it out. And more and more of a sense that I am in a world that has gone completely mad and that I am appalled at. So, given that, I'm probably like all of the other women in my family, but I'm trying hard not to slap my kid around.

Meena Alexander: I just wanted to respond to what Dorothy said about having something that's inside of you, that it will kill you unless it gets out. Because I think, for me, poetry really is the music of survival. And I think that's how I started writing and that's why I keep writing. It's like, if I don't, I probably wouldn't be able to cross the street. And I don't think of myself as an artist.

I have to tell you a story. I teach for a living. I'm a Professor; that's my day job, I tell my students. And I have

this very brilliant student who, an international student from Korea. And she was illustrating something about a writer, up on the blackboard. And she put "author" and then she drew an arrow to show where the art work comes from, and she said -- author, and then she said artist, and then she said "she."

And I felt a shiver go down my spine. I thought -- it still comes to me as a shock to say artist, she. I mean, what does this mean about where I'm coming from? Right? And I told the class this. I said -- you can't imagine how exciting it is for me, to have those put together without any flutter of the eyelash or any tremor of the brain.

I started writing when I was a child. I started writing poetry in secret. And I used to write in the toilet because I felt that was a safe place. No one was going to get at me. And also, no one was going to see what I was doing because it felt like this really secret thing that I had to do for myself.

And it was like a whole lot later that I had the guts to send poems out, and have them appear in the world. And I think that art, for those of us who make it, carries this incredible electric charge because it's done often -- not always -- but often, in great isolation.

And then, I think that the grace is if someone looks at it or reads it, that you sort of almost don't expect it.

Elaine Kim: I'm a teacher and an academic and I feel that we talk about and write about what artists and activists do, and I definitely consider you artists, whether you consider yourself that or not. And I also think that everybody needs stories, and maybe there was a time when there were stories that were told, sitting around the fire.

And now, the stories that are always pushed on us are like the story of Camilla Parker Bowles, marrying Prince Charles. Or how the U.S. is helping Iraq; or how President Bush is going to Texas. And we need our artists, because our artists tell us some other story, which is really the story that we need, the stories that we need.

So although I myself am not an artist, I feel like it would be impossible to live without artists. So thanks a lot.

Staceyann Chin: May I jump in? I want to respond a little bit to what Dorothy said earlier. I wear the term artist very carelessly, very comfortably. Because of course, this is what I do for a living, and I do nothing else; I guest lecture, but I go in and I say what I want to say and I leave.

But it's this very strange thing that my whole life, my whole day, my whole night. Everything about my life is a deep discussion about the work and people refer to you as an artist so much, that after a while, I don't know, I'm more struggling to find the person I am outside of the artistic.

I wanted to respond to what Dorothy said about the women in her family, because for years I hated my mother. And when I finally found her and found a window of opportunity to speak to her about who she was; she was this woman who wanted to be a writer and had no way to be a writer. My mother used to tell the rest of my family that she was traveling and that she was a writer and that she would go to Stockholm, and she was going to there and there.

So for the first two years of my active career, when I would say to my aunt -- yeah, I just came in from Johannesburg. There was a secret nod between everybody, like -- yeah, right, it's happening again.

(laughter)

And I didn't know why. And when I was on Broadway and they had our faces on the buses, like -- my aunt called me up on the phone one day, kind of hyperventilating, going, "Do you know you're on a bus?"

And I'm like -- yeah, I'm in a show, yeah. And she was like, "So really, what is it?" And she was now able to have the conversation about what I do. And so, 20 years ago, 30 years ago my mother lied about my identity; like she spoke me into being a whole other, spiritual self.

But this woman was going crazy. She wanted to be a writer. She wanted to be a performer. She wanted to be respected. She

wanted her story to come forward, but she has two kids and she was a poor girl from Jamaica with nowhere to go with it. And I didn't kind of know that I as this writer/performer person until I was shuffled into America; I came here so I could be a lesbian because, of course, it's illegal and dangerous to be a lesbian in Jamaica.

So I came here and I'm like -- okay, let me be a lesbian here and chase women.

(laughter)

And then it was illegal almost to be black. So then you're like -- oh, what do I do with this? And then you start going to the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe and you start gelling on the microphone; and then people start listening, more people start listening and all of the sudden you are a poet.

And you're like -- oh, my God, how did this happen? It kind of tumbled upon you. But I believe that every single person, the notion of artistry -- it is the very thing that we use to survive, and those of us who are facing that survival head on, in a very visible way, are those of us who are become "artists."

But I think that everybody is an artist, but not everybody has the space and the time and the leisure to sit and talk about like -- okay, my boobs have fallen like an inch today; let me

write a whole freakin' four pages on it. Not everybody has that kind of freedom.

But if we did, we would because that's how we struggle. Every single thing, which is why people, when they get it, they read the poem and they go -- oh, you said it the way that I couldn't say it. It's not that you couldn't say it that way, it's just that you never had the time and you weren't given the language to kind of work it out, I think.

Ann Cvetkovich: Do you want to say more to that, Dorothy?

Dorothy Allison: I was going to talk about money and time, next. In the 1970s I belonged to a feminist collective where we would read our bad poetry to each other, and every new bad poem was wonderful. Because it told us some secret thing we hadn't been able to say before. You know. But that was all about being an artist on a plane in which we also got day jobs, and we were all barely surviving. And three-quarters of us are lesbians .

Speaker: Four-fifths.

Dorothy Allison: Four-fifths, in my movement. We had a sense of being the audience for each other, but we had no money and no time. No energy. Every illness laid us low and so much work to be done that lots of us pretty much ate ourselves up trying to do it all at once. Thank God for caffeine.

Speaker: Let's talk about money.

Ann Cvetkovich: Yeah, I'll throw it out there. Well, material support is a fancy word and money is really what we're talking about. The reason I wanted to ask about that is precisely because of this issue of time to create art. Who gets to do it -- if we begin with the assumption that everybody has a story to tell, but not everybody has the resources to do it.

So those who do are aware that they are in a position of very tremendous privilege. But again, I would hold out for the fact that it is the birthright of all of us to get to ideally tell that story. So for me, that is a vision of social transformation with art as one kind of tip of a movement forward.

So how do we do it? I want to hear about how you do it. There are a couple of specific tags I want to add here. Dorothy, you mentioned in an email exchange we had, about the issue of academic affiliation. So three of our panelists have academic affiliations and might want to talk about the way in which that sustains them.

Others do not, and might want to talk about what challenge does that create? I'm thinking back to the comment that was made by Leslie Feinberg at the previous panel, about the fact that she has recently completed another novel which will not in any way contribute to her ability to pay her rent at the end of the month.

And we live in a culture that, in addition to devaluing people for all kinds of different aspects of their identity, I think devalues people who choose art as part of that identity. Art is another one of those zones of controversy. It's a zone of censorship. It's a zone of de-funding.

It is something that the funding for which could be compared in kind of a seamy and vulgar way with the funding that is available to the military industrial complex. And so, for me one kind of fighting word is -- a living wage for artists, in addition to a living wage for everybody.

So how do artists make a living wage? And I want to especially ask about the role of feminist systems of production because when there was a movement of bad writers, there was also a movement to create bookstores, to create publishing houses, to create recording companies, to create performance spaces, to create cultural zones that would help to support that movement of bad writers.

That has disappeared. Some would say, in some cases, because of greater public recognition but I want to hear what people have to say about that. An issue very near and dear to my heart over the last number of years has been the project of lesbian visibility and lesbian representation.

And I always ask myself -- who's making a living wage off of that? We may have expanded representation, but who is

profiting from that -- is definitely something to ask and to look for when you're looking for the bottom line? So I think of this in terms of, say, Tammy Rae, your involvement in Mr. Lady as an effort to actually reinvent, recreate, in an affectionate way, some of the systems of women's cultural production that had existed in the '70s, that I think you felt needed to be sustained, revived, recreated?

Tammy Rae Carland: God, I could talk about money all day. I want to say a few things, because I'm one of the people who have academic support that really doesn't feel like support when you're going up for tenure as a dyke and a freak. I am an Associate Professor and my income pays, half of it goes to my rent and I also support my family, all of the women and children who are on welfare. I'm the only one that's not.

I gravitated towards the academy as my savior, and it has saved my soul in many ways because I love teaching, and I get so much out of that exchange. But it's not a good living. At least, teaching art -- which I need to say on this panel. Even at an art school where the art historians get paid more than the artists, as though the managers of art get paid more than the labor that produces the art.

But because I made that decision, and I gravitated towards that for health insurance and the capacity to pay my mom's rent, it has afforded me lots of different opportunities. One of

which was living in a small, not small, but rural town in Durham, in Chapel Hill for five years, where my rent was really cheap and I could afford to pay off my student loans. And in doing so, I had the space and the energy and the drive to start this thing called Mr. Lady Records and Videos, which I started with my partner at the time, Kaia Wilson.

And it's quoted a lot as being modeled out of both our involvement with the punk movement. But the reality is that it really comes out of an impassioned interest in what happened in second wave feminism and for millions of unrecorded and unacknowledged projects that were publishing houses and books.

And I just spent, a few months ago, visiting this woman, Jean Mountaingrove, who lives on Womyn's Land in Oregon; and her and her partner, Ruth Mountaingrove. They started this Womyn's Land 30 years ago where they put out WomanSpirit magazine, which was one of the first feminist, lesbian journals to ever come out. And they produce this on this land, with no plumbing and no electricity.

They also produce The Blatant Image which was the first and only ever feminist photography journal, for three summers in a row. Maybe people in this room went, but these dykes come from all over the country to learn how to do photography -- again, with no plumbing and no electricity.

I am really inspired by that history and really intrigued by it. And I get a lot of energy out of it, and that's why I started Mr. Lady. Because I have gotten to the point where I call myself an artist because that's what I am. But I also have this drive to nurture and help put out into the world, works by other people. And that's been something that I find really creative. I find it to be a creative thing that I do.

I started this business with \$37.00; Kya and I literally just started naming it and talking about it in an interview, saying -- yeah, we're doing this record label and this is what it's called. And some girl from Massachusetts decided that she was going to order stuff from us, and sent us a \$37.00 check, and so it was -- now we have to do it.

(laughter)

So we went to the bank and got a bank account with a \$37.00 check, and it's been a business that could sustain itself. It was never a living; we both had day jobs, really big day jobs. And our own creative practice, which there were sacrifices involved in our own work, in our capacity to put out the work of others.

But it just took a lot of love. It didn't really take a lot of money. It took a lot of time and it surely took its toll in many ways.

But I really believe in working outside the system. People this morning were talking about equality as the misguided goal. Like -- equal to what? Equal to the oppressors? No, that's not the goal. The same thing with culture. It's not so much that I started a record label so that you could replace Sony. It's not that you can be like Sony Records. It's, instead of Sony Records. And people could do their own artwork and it could have feminist content and it could have dyke content. And all of the modes of representation involved in putting work out could be controlled by the artist. And that was really one of the main goals in doing it.

And I can say more about it, but I just want to acknowledge that it really does come out of all those really bad, amazing writers that you're talking about, and those efforts. I find those continually inspiring.

But, there's a burnout rate for this kind of work, and I'm closing the record label. I think that culture is temporal; it's supposed to change, it's supposed to shift, so now it's somebody else's turn. I want to have a baby. I have other things to do. I want to go do some more stuff. But it's supposed to shift; that it's not just passing it to the younger generation or somebody ten years younger than me.

It could be somebody ten years older than me. I just think that things are, some things in culture are temporary. That's

not to say all cultural work should be temporary. I don't want the feminist bookstores to disappear. I don't think they're supposed to be temporary; I think that's another conversation. But I'm going to let somebody else talk.

Staceyann Chin: Addressing the issue of temporary, I think people ask all the time -- how did this happen? And I think it is a notion of these things, or these ventures or these ideas being temporary. You have to kind of be at the right place at the right time.

I know, off the top of my head, I can list maybe 100 poets who are better poets than myself -- by my own standards and by standards of other people around me too. Who are dykes, who are out, loud dykes on stage. But the specifics of who we are determine who is making money.

I make a comfortable living. And I do support the five kids in Jamaica for school every year, and the whole range of people who you can help. Because sometimes five American dollars just makes all the difference in the world in somebody's life who is 13 and they just want a pretty pair of sneakers to wear to school.

But the whole notion of it being temporary is very interesting to me. Because it means that, like it or not, commercialism and all of that kind of stuff has you kind of lined up as the flavor of the month. And in a very kind of

careful way, I think that I happened because three years ago when they were putting this Broadway show together, I happened to fit one of the flavors they needed for the show.

And I don't mean it as any kind of negative criticism, but I have this body that men respond to, in a certain kind of way, which makes me very easy to go down, those kinds of things. People often talk about how musical my accent is and how lyrical and how -- blah, blah, blah. I mean, it really is just my accent and there are millions of people in Jamaica with the same bloody accent.

(laughter)

It's not that fantastic, it's just that it's fantastic because I'm here. And so, it has to do with exoticization and those kinds of things. It's what you are. And I wear a pushup bra and I'm 110 pounds.

But it's got this weird thing to it. It's like, whatever flavor you are. So the woman who was overweight and she talks about being overweight and she talks about being -- I want to be a positive image. It's whatever flavor you are.

Like, whoever is in at the moment. The schools would have you in. People will invite you all the time. And they find you interesting at the time. So my question, I guess, to the rest of the panel is -- how do you deal like with, okay, you are the flavor of the month?

Because I see everybody nodding, so I know you know what I'm talking about. Like, okay, yes, we need a white dyke from the Dirty South on this one.

(laughter)

So, how do you deal with that? Because I struggle with it all the time.

Meena Alexander: You know, this question of money and flavor of the month, I mean -- it's big-deal stuff. If I were to try and buy myself lunch for a week with the money I get for a poem, I wouldn't do very well. So I do have a regular job because I have two children, rent -- all this stuff.

And I think of whatever income that I make -- which is really not very much -- by my writing, as a little bit of money to buy extras or to go home to see my mother in India; the airfare is expensive, they really wipe you out.

But the other part of it is, I think that in this culture particularly, money is really the mark of most things. I stand at the supermarket lines and I stand a long time because I like to read the horoscopes in the magazines -- I don't want to buy the magazines, I just read them.

And then people come up and they engage me in conversations -- what do you do? And so then I normally say -- what do you do? And then they tell me, and they say -- well, what do you do? And I say -- I'm a poet.

And suddenly, it's like they think they're looking at a crazy person. And I am still not used to this. So one of the reasons when we were asked at the beginning of the panel -- well, are you an artist? I hesitate. Even when I say I'm a poet, people say -- oh. And then they'll quote me some poem very badly, or something like -- my mother's a poet or something.

It's like this thing you have to put in the closet. And that is often related to the issue of money because fiction writers make money. Poets don't, and everybody knows it -- unless you perform, like Staceyann does. When I see the look in people's eyes, I say -- actually, I'm a professor. And then, everybody looks so relieved.

(laughter)

Ann Cvetkovich: Gainfully employed. Shall I put another one on the table? Okay, we'll just stir it all up and see what everybody else says. So we've talked a little about art, we've talked a little about money. I want to make sure -- we've already mentioned it, but I want to make sure it gets some serious airtime here -- politics.

(laughter)

And the role of these artists, as public intellectuals, activists, force for social change. I'm dropping out a question here that maybe will come up later. I'll just reference another

question I have is -- about public. For example, how it is that you build a movement by building an audience, so that we can talk more, for example, about Staceyann as a poet, who works within a kind of scene around slam poetry that creates a kind of popular audience, and how that works.

I think it's connected here, but let us talk to my question about nation, migration and a different version of who we are as Americans. I ask this question, both as a non-U.S. citizen and as a queer. And I ask that question -- again, going back, because I really think it's kind of a benchmark.

It's like, give the artist or person who is trying to tell stories that they need to tell, this kind of passion. And a lot of our panelists, I think, represent views and stories and ways of thinking and lives that are not visible within many of the circuits within which information circulates in our culture.

And I just want to start with national identity as one of those because I've been teaching a course called "Cultural Migration" and it's in our literature department; it's cross with other departments.

And I really feel very keenly that we need more than demographics and journalism to tell us who we are in the U.S. and in the world. And so, one of the stories that I see people telling is -- turning to a kind of autobiography, but it's not just their story, it's a story of a lot of other people too.

In order to say, for example -- who I am, how I came to be here, what's my point of view on things might be as someone who is an American, of sorts; but trying to present a different vision of what America might be. And I just wonder if any or all of you relate to that question.

Many of you have very complicated stories of how you got to be who you are and where you are. And interestingly, I think migration, regionality, nations moving around, et cetera -- is a story to tell there. Also, why you might have moved in order to be able to make your art. New York, for example, is a place that a lot of people come to in order to make art or to be with certain kinds of people where they can make movements and community.

But in the process of making those moves, they may leave other things behind, whether it's particular regions, particular nations, particular people, et cetera. So that makes for a lot of stories that I think I see all of you kind of using art, to tell. Who shall we start with?

Elaine Kim: In the panel this morning, Siobhan talked about getting beyond single-issue politics and Surina talked about getting beyond single-identity politics. And there was a Quaker, a student in the audience who asked whether we could be unique and the same, at the same time?

And I was thinking that, it's been very fashionable for about 15 years to beat up on identity politics, whatever that means. And actually, identity politics has already been dead for about 15 years, so beating up on it, on the part of the mainstream or on the part of the feminists or the people of color -- it's not a very useful exercise.

But I thought about myself as having been born in New York City and having grown up in the 1950s in Maryland, before the Kennedy Administration. And I went to school in Philadelphia and came to graduate school in New York. And then I ended up in California, where there is a critical mass of Asian Americans.

And that was the first time I had a critical mass of Asian Americans. And even now, I don't necessarily always get to Flushing when I come to New York; and I don't necessarily always go to Korea Town when I go to L.A., but I get a lot of pleasure out of knowing that they are there.

And so I kind of need them, and I don't think it's about identity politics, but it's about needing to have a story, as I said a minute ago. And I think that we have a kind of individualism that's kind of autonomy, like Leslie said this morning.

But we also have collectivity and the United States culture is so anti-communist that it's anti-collective too. Which is why we have so much trouble with things like public health and

public education and day care. People have to do a capitalist dance about day care.

You have to compete with everybody to get day care. You have to do it all on your own; you have to have lots of money in order to get day care. It's ridiculous. You should be able to just get day care. But to me, it's kind of emblematic of the kind of aberrational individualism that we ended up having here.

So I need a certain kind of community and certain kind of collectivity and I think that it's not an either/or. It's a dialectic. And I also think that within the Asian-American group, or even a Korean-American group, there is so much diversity that you can find the critical point of difficulty right within the group.

And I see, in migration, I see one of the most important problems, so I'm surprised that not many people have mentioned today. As being the way middleclass women benefit from the labor of immigrant women and immigrant and poor working class women, to do the house work and to take care of their children; to enable the middleclass women to be professors or cultural producers, and so on.

And this is not to lay a guilt trip on the middleclass women, but it's sewn into the fabric of women's lives. And maybe I'm not familiar with New York today. But in California,

there's a huge cadre of Latino and Asian immigrant people who do all the work for the household -- the yard and the whatever.

So this is something that, there's like this hidden dragon in the room all the time. So I would say the whole issue of identity politics, single identity is a big red herring that we should drop talking about that; and we should understand that in many cases, national identity remains very important.

But perhaps not in a simple-minded way that it might have been empowering in the 1960s. It's never been that way. Things change. It's not like that. And so, when I tell people that I teach Asian-American studies, I can see their eyes glaze over. It's like what you were saying about being a poet -- oh, she's into identity politics, and probably has a little brown beret or something that like.

Because they have no idea how complex it is, how layered it is and how different it is from what people understood it to be in the 1960s.

Meena Alexander: This whole thing about nation is sort of a big deal for someone like me. Because I came to the United States about 20 years ago and I was very excited by the idea of America when I was in India. I was raised in India and also in Sudan, in Khartoum, actually; and I used to go back and forth.

I lived in Britain, so I was three continents away. I came to New York and I was very excited because I had read Walt

Whitman and Emerson and so forth. So I land here in New York, and I had to learn about race in this country because I'm a certain color, but I had always been -- certainly in India and in North Africa -- in the majority.

So to come and understand that one is "part of a minority" and this is a really racialized country. I think it's because of that that I started, I presented myself as a writer. I had no doubt that if I had been in India, at least I hope so, I would have been a writer. But not this sort of writer. And I think, in a way, the writing of the last decade or whatever has come out in response to having to construct a kind of identity for myself, where I felt had not existed; because I didn't know what sort of person I was.

As I wrote in an autobiography called Fault Lines because I felt I was falling in between the cracks in the earth; and I had to kind of make myself up. And I just want to say, that after 9/11, things have shifted somewhat again for brown people in this country.

And I remember that -- we live in New York City -- and it's something that you just sort of have to bear in mind. There were times when I was scared to wear a sari, immediately in the aftermath of 9/11 because many of my students who were women who wore head scarves, they had things thrown at them.

So I think this whole question of how one is seen in the world, actually enters that molten terrain out of which we make our art.

I mean, you can say it, but an artist should not have to say -- I have to do this or that with my art, at least in that way. It sort of has to come to you. And I know it sounds like a weird thing to say, but I think people will agree that the stuff that really comes is actually in some ways often hidden from yourself, because perhaps it's too scary to know.

Or it's a hidden language which is not readily available even to you, when you're doing your shopping and your cooking and your laundry -- when you find time to do the laundry. So I think there is something, at least it seems to me, in the nature of art, that is viscerally involved in the making of art. But it's viscerally involved with our bodily selves.

And it's almost like making a print of the body, and I don't mean literally, like lying on the paper and getting photographed, or xeroxing your body, print on paper. I think that there's some way in which the body enters very, very powerfully into even the slightest trace that we might make -- whether it's on canvas or paper or cinema or whatever.

And so, I think that stuff is a sort of conduit. And I think for people who, if you think of yourself as part of a minority -- this again, is a very American term -- how can you

make sense of a country where demographically the majority is minority?

What does that mean? And I think this sort of question, and also I think related to this is something Ann and I were talking about earlier at lunch is that -- one has to try not to censor one's self. It's very hard because there are many things the world does not want you to talk about.

Or there are things that the world wants you to talk about because it's exotic. And I think either way, it would really cut into what it might mean for you to be an artist, who you are.

Dorothy Allison: I have not thought of myself as an American, never, until I was invited to go to another country as an American writer. It's a weird thing. I've always thought of myself as a Southerner, as a lesbian, as a working class writer, as a working class activist, as a feminist activist. But I never thought of myself as an American.

And really, only until I met non-Americans who would then ask me questions of which I had to answer as an American, which puts you in a weird place when you've always been outside your own nation. All of the sudden I'm like -- oh, God, well, I didn't vote for him but . . .

(laughter)

You step outside your nation in your nation. But there is something really dangerous about suddenly being your nation. Let me talk about it as literature. I never thought of myself as a writer, aside from all the issues of money, access, legitimacy --I never thought that I had any right to be what had made so much difference in my life.

At different points in my life, I was literally, my life was saved by the right poem, the right story, the right voice on the page or the right voice heard. Those people were saints. They were saints who intervened when I needed them. I couldn't be that. I could be a cultural worker, and I could march in the demonstration and I could work and I could be an editor, and I could push towards that.

When I started writing my own stories, I really think I started a lot of times, writing a defense of who I was in this culture. And I know that the first stories I wrote were a defense of my family. I tried to write a story about my cousins who had 11 kids and who had 9 of them taken away by welfare, in sets of three.

So I wrote this really wonky poem about what it's like to have 11 kids and they take them three at a time. But they don't take the last three, because those three are fucked up; because the last three -- they had birth defects. They left those with her.

So I wrote this really angry poem about my cousin, who I adored, losing her kids -- just to defend her. To make her real in the world. And that made me, took me into the country of those people that saved my life. Because when she heard me read the poems, she told me she was going to stop drinking; she was going to do this stuff, and it was wonderful.

Of course, she didn't stop drinking and all this other stuff. But it was like, all of the sudden I was doing for her what other people had done for me. That feels really good. That feels enormously powerful. It didn't have anything to do with money. It had to do with heart and soul and validity and power and recompense.

Then, in 1992, I published this novel that I loved and it was deeply important to me and expected to sell 8,000 because I was going to sell those 8,000 copies if I had to go out on the street and make you buy them. But all of the sudden, I was a finalist for the National Book Award and it sold a whole bunch of copies, and I made some money.

And something weird happened. All of the sudden, I was legitimate. And all of the sudden, these people who deeply I admired, put their arms around me. I'd go to a dinner and Toni Cade Bambara touches my arm. And she's sitting next to Ralph Ellison. And my agent is there and she's beaming at me.

And I am introduced to people whose names I know, but who either make my heart pound or scared the bejezzus out of me -- three-quarters of them scared the bejezzus out of me, and we will talk about that in the bathroom later.

(laughter)

And all of the sudden, I liked that. I really liked that. I liked being told that I was a genius. I liked little girls coming up to me and kissing my neck and saying -- oh, Dorothy! That's better than cash. That's soul gravy.

(laughter)

And it's way dangerous. It's way, way dangerous. It made me go home and try to figure out what the fuck I had done. Because I grew up an outsider and I'm not really an American. I'm not really, I know I'm not a saint and I know I'm not legitimate.

And if they all love me so much and approve of what I've done, I must have done something wrong. And then this little part of me -- how can I do that wrong thing again and get all them girls to kiss my neck one more time?

(laughter)

I teach. I love teaching. I love teaching writing. I love more than anything except sex -- that you can work with someone and get them to take their story out of themselves and

onto the page and into the world. And show them how to make it stronger and more effective and less crippling in the doing so.

I love that work. That work, to me, is legitimate. I can do that work any time; you can pay me to come. You can pay me damn little and I'll come and try to do that work. It feels right and good and strong to me. And there's no deeply-dangerous, sneaky, kiss-my-neck shit in it.

Because it's real work, and I have to be slightly mean to you, so it's work. That's what teaching is. It's legitimate. But writing -- writing, for me, is about letting the spirit come through you. And I'm going to have to use some Baptist language and if it's offensive, I'm sorry.

But writing is really, writing well, writing something that you know is really good -- it's about letting the spirit move through you. It's not about angling for anything and it ain't about cash. And it is deeply, deeply dangerous. And the only thing I do know what's better than sex, the only thing I do know that makes it worth the fact that most of these institutions that published my work in the beginning, were built on the lives of women who gave over their lives to them.

I know why you want to quit. All the feminist and lesbian presses that were there when I was 24 and looking for somewhere to publish that are gone -- were built on women, literally

giving their lives to those presses. If they took a salary, it was barely enough to survive.

For all the things they did wrong, they fed their lives back into it. And that's what made those institutions happen. And we have moved into a place where there are still people creating these institutions, feeding their lives back into it and not surviving, not making it possible.

I can't get a handle around the fact that at some point in time, you can do the work you love and marginally survive; and at other points in time, try to do the work you love and not manage it. And there is no justice about it. But I know I would not write, I would not be here if other people had not made that same sacrifice, not made that same choice.

Redefine themselves on the page or in their voice or gone out and done this stuff. And you give yourself way, over and over again. I want so much, I want so much for there to be a feminism that gives us back our lives in a utopian model. I want every fucking community to have a corner bookstore and a performance space.

I want the school to be places where kids are eager to go. I want this nation to be absolutely and completely remade, so that I can stand up and say -- I am an American -- proudly.

(applause)

And know that in the joy of my life, is not created in the loss or disparaging of anybody else's life -- that's justice. That's what I want. But I believe all of us want it -- right? Among other things.

Staceyann Chin: One of the interesting things -- Meena just mentioned it -- shifting cultures. I grew up in Jamaica, which has its own problems. We don't have racism in Jamaica. We have shade-ism. Where if you are lighter-skinned, then so and so, then it matters. So my whole life, I lived as a lighter-skinned individual.

And then I came to America and I discovered nigger-ness. It was just very, very, very interesting because my whole life, people talked about my fair skin. And then I would be in a room of white women who were talking about my dark skin. It was kind of like -- whoa! Very interesting.

And then the other thing that I discovered about America is, in conversation Americans -- and I say Americans with the quotations around it because -- Americans like simplicity in conversations. And so they listen to me and they say -- your accent has a kind of British lilt and you speak English so good. They don't know that maybe it's really "well."

(laughter)

And that's my tongue-in-cheek American dig, because I live here and I earn American dollars and I take them home to Jamaica

and buy sneakers for my nieces and nephews. But it's a very interesting thing. I meet people on planes every day who say -- my God, do they have electricity in Jamaica? So, really, how did you end up being half Chinese? Is your father from China?

I don't ask people how they are half Korean and half white because I know there are Korean Americans here. How dare you not know that there are Chinese Jamaicans that exist, and for you to challenge me on my identity? Talk about multiple identities.

They don't know what to do with somebody who is half black and half Chinese, and is a Jamaican national. And you throw "queer" into it and they're like -- oh . . .

(laughter)

And you throw queer into it and -- really, I'm politically queer, but I do enjoy the feel of a man's body against mine. They're like -- ahhhh!

(laughter)

I mean, so when you mix it up a little bit and then when you say, when you look like, they assume that . . . so they drop you off at Wartburg, the college in Iowa. And they say -- so, are you a student there?

And I go -- no, I'm a writer. And they're like -- oh, okay. So, you're not a student? I'm like -- no, I'm 33 years

old and there's a whole other mind thing because 33 doesn't look like this.

And all of the sudden, you start having to like, go to bat for every bit of your identity, every single day. You have to choose whether you're Jamaican today or choose whether you are queer today. I mean, I am constantly offended, deeply offended by the American ignorance about anything outside of America.

And I'm sorry my tone is sharp, but this is how I feel. Like, when I was 11, if somebody said "Iowa" to me, I wouldn't go "huh?" Because I know there's a place in America called Iowa, and I'm 12. Now, if you say Clarendon to an American, they're like, "huh?" They don't know that that's a place in Jamaica.

But when I go to Melbourne and I talk to the 12-year-old in Melbourne, they know about America and they know about Jamaica. And I talk to the Nigerian kid who says -- yes, Bob Marley is from Jamaica.

They're 12 years old and they live in Algeria. If you're not overtly political creature, how do you know this? There is a grand sense of the people who are in charge in America, do not care about the rest of the world. And that's at the center of the axis upon which America will fall.

And I'm going to put my ass on the line and people will stone me at this point, but that's why those planes went

through. I mean, it's fucked up and people died and it was sad, but that's why those planes went through those buildings.

Because people who are crazy are really upset that America does not care about the rest of the world, with the amount of power that's invested in it.

Those people are crazy and they were going to do shit anyway, but maybe they would not have done that shit. Maybe they would have smoked hashish, like in a room somewhere, or whatever denotes crazy in people's world these days.

And it's an interesting thing, and we don't want to talk about it because it's uncomfortable because there are people here who do not fall within the context of what the power structure kind of hands out to the rest of the world. But there are people in Scandinavia, people in Sweden who do not know that you exist.

They think all that exists is what they see on CNN or Fox and so, it's important to begin these conversations. Because even as a non-American voice -- and when I say non-American, I say it very carefully because I have lived here for eight years, and I do feel like New York is my home. But then, what does that make me? If I'm a Jamaican national and we have to talk about how artists, we are kind of like, the privileged artists have the space to move through cultures and borders.

I feel like I don't really belong to anywhere, but I belong everywhere. And that's not a bad thing for me, most days. I know where to get good coffee in Sydney. And I know where to get the good roti in Dubai. Like, I know these things because my life has let me into these places that allow me to know these things.

And so, we can talk about boundaries and borders and privilege and all that stuff, but like -- how do we begin the conversation and how do I, as an outsider here, begin the conversation without being judgmental.

It's a very, very, very interesting place because largely speaking -- why the fuck is it so important, and we have whole entire sections of academia dedicated to multiple identities? Like everybody in America has a multiple identity. It's not a weird thing. Everybody, just like the rest of the world. Like, I mean, the average Korean does not have, every Korean does not have a store in Queens that sells like Jamaican food. Like, it's not that simple.

And the 2.5 children and the picket fence -- I haven't met that family yet. And I've been here eight years, moving through every state. I have not met that person, which means maybe that person does not exist. So what we have been fighting is a myth.

And I want to scream and knock things because it does not exist, this picture that they're selling us every single day.

The welfare mother who doesn't do any of those things. You talk to her for long enough and you realize she's not that person they say.

Like, we are unexpected beings, like humanity is frail and it's capricious, it's not predictable. It's not predictable, which is why the best-written stories leave us completely redefined because we find people, we find that the tale, The Bastard Out of Carolina, like it's not predictable.

Like the details aren't predictable, the details of our lives. I'll say it over and over again because I don't know how else to say it. We are not predictable beings. And none of us fall into the stereotypes. And in fact, the stereotype is the anomaly. The stereotype is the anomaly.

And we need to talk about that and see what that means, but no, it's going to have us like deconstruct everything because everything now we can't refer to these stereotypes and we can't say -- oh, we're fighting this stereotype. Because now, we're going to have new language and we're going to have new ideas and we're going to have new identities.

And then, all of the sudden, nobody is special because everybody is special. I'm not saying it, oversimplifying it, but none of us are predictable. I would never have guessed that Dorothy is like, a flirt. Like, who would have guessed that?

(laughter)

She acts like she's serious shit, you know.

(laughter)

Like, we're not predictable. We're not predictable.

Ann Cvetkovich: That is the beauty of the live encounter. I am looking at the clock and thinking that we should go to the audience at this point. I have many more questions. I think there are people who have microphones, that you can run around with. This way -- go for it.

Speaker: Thank you to all of the panelists. I feel moved to talk about just briefly, about an art form that is not represented on the panel. And especially since many of the points that you talked about are exceedingly relevant to the art of dance.

And I've been writing about dance for as long as this conference has been running, for about 30 years. Dance is an art form that is very temporary. It goes on the stage. It's an art of the body. And when the dancers leave the space, that's it. Even if you do a videotape, that is no true record of the performance that was done on that stage that day, that particular hour.

It's also nonverbal, largely -- unless a text is used. And I think the fact that it is temporary, nonverbal and an art of the body, should suggest to the panelists why it is often the, shall I say, the bastard child of the art world? And it is not

documented by the media to the extent that more popular forms of the arts and more moneyed forms of the arts, more income-producing forms of the art. It does not get that level of attention.

And so, I often come to panels like this and I find that dance is not represented. This is not a criticism, but perhaps a suggestion that in the future, people think about reaching out to the dance community and pulling it in. I think that dancers do have a lot to say about these issues. I don't think dancers are used to being paid attention to.

And I think that it's necessary to welcome the dance world in and to show that there is something that we all have in common, something that we can do in the struggle. And I would welcome seeing that in the future.

(applause)

Meena Alexander: Yeah, dance is a very ancient and also, in some ways, an instinctive form. But it's highly codified, it's ritualized. And I think in all of the cultures of the world, dance is extremely important.

Dorothy Allison: There's a short story by Samuel Delaney called "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones." Do you know that story? I love that story; I read it many years ago. And I wanted to live in that story for a particular reason. It is a story about artists and culture.

And these artists are called singers. And they don't publish, they aren't paid. There's some question in my mind about how exactly they do survive. Samuel is a little soft on that detail. He's really, really good about the young singer who is the masochist who is going to . . . well, never mind.

What I fell in love with in that story is that at any point in time, there aren't that many singers. But it's set in a time when there is a global culture. And singers are known -- everybody knows who the singers are. And everybody watches for when a singer will begin to sing.

But singers do their art when something happens to trigger the art. And they are a little bit like slam poets and a little bit like dancers. But what they do is that, in public, they will be moved and they will begin to perform. And in the story, some of the greatest singers' performances have happened after a national catastrophe in which a singer began.

And immediately, whenever a singer begins to sing, everyone squats down and watches and listens. And the singer does the act, the poem, or the story or the song. And everyone glories in it, but no one records it, no one writes it down. It is an art of the immediate.

It changes everything around it and then it goes away. I love that idea and I wish we had a culture in which that could happen. That as soon as anyone was moved to art and began to

produce it, we would all immediately turn our attention and give them everything they needed to make it possible.

Audience Member: Thank you, it's been great. I clapped at the mention of the World Trade Center in anything but the most sanctimonious story that we have to keep saying about it; and I just appreciated your guts for bringing up a slightly different slant.

People have been defamed for less than that. That's all.

(laughter)

Audience Member: I just wanted to get back to the issue of activism and art and what is the intersection, and are you automatically an activist because you're an artist? And because you're putting a story into the world? And I see you shaking your heads no. So then, what are the elements that need to be there? Where is that place where art meets activism, where art becomes activism?

Be it visual art, performance art, writing -- I'd love to hear you all address that.

Tammy Rae Carland: I don't think it inherently is activism at all, and I think that the majority of it isn't. I think there are different modes of activism and I think there is political activism that is really focused on legislative change, governmental legislative change.

And sometimes there are artists who are involved in that process and sometimes there are artists who are making work about that. Although I find that very rare these days; there's an enormous backlash on, not only political identity and identity-based politics -- but artists who fall under that name.

So I don't think it's an intrinsic relationship. But I think one's identity, so if you are queer, if you are a woman, if you are an out feminist, if you're particularly a person of color or have any kind of radical identity that falls outside of, that mirrors itself after the rest of the world -- to the extreme, I would say even more so.

I work at a really liberal, maybe leftist-leaning art college in the Bay Area, and I sit in previews in which the language and the discourse is kind of unbelievable. But I do believe in the power of visibility and I do believe that even attempting to have an art career, in some ways, is a form of activism.

And I think that visibility in itself is an act of activism and I think that people can use mainstream film, you can write a Hollywood script and pass it off as the real thing. And it is the real thing and it can be an active, radical intervention.

I believe that. I believe that your book could be a best seller and it's still radical, it's still really important and it's an act of activism. Although it's not the same as creating

legislative change in that work. That's different; it's different kind of work.

I guess I've tried to figure out a way in my life that I can kind of hold two things at once, that I can operate on multiple levels and I don't have to not make the work I want to make because it doesn't have the impact of something, like more non-profit work I used to do.

So starting the record label, maybe it doesn't have the social organizing to it that some of like working in domestic violence used to for me. But to me, it was just as political, if that makes sense. Although a really, a different form. But I did want to say that I think there's an enormous backlash around work that is in the mainstream art world, the world of cultural production, that has to do with identity and has to do with politics.

Elaine Kim: Art can be important to activism, because mainstream culture has such an impact on how people the world. For example, my students were so seduced by "Die Another Day"; there are really great special effects and it moves from Havana to Korea to some place in Eastern Europe. And it has Halle Berry with low-cut bathing suits, stepping out of the water. It was really fast-moving and a lot of explosions and people, blood coming out.

And I thought that, that's all the more reason why we really need our art, because the story is so seductive and so intoxicating. The Camilla Parker Bowles story; it's not only redundant, but it's really slick. And it's all the more a marvel to me, that artists, being creative the way they are, doing the great work that they do -- yet they show us again and again, that human creativity is possible, even in a moment like this.

As a teacher, I have to figure out a way to intervene in that. Because the kids in my class, they are 18 years old and they love video games and stuff. There are these video games now that show North Korean people being blown away; nobody ever explains that the U.S. bombed the whole of North Korea and all of the central part of Korea into smithereens, so that nothing is left. And then that's why people think that the U.S. is hostile towards Korea. Of course. There is a root. It's just not crazy, but we don't know about that; and even my students don't know about that. So when they see "Die Another Day," it's just like . . .

Staceyann Chin: Kill the bad people.

Elaine Kim: Oh, yeah. And they're part of it.

Staceyann Chin: Art and activism, where they intersect. Paying attention. Engaged. I don't know my own art without activism because I started speaking out through poetry because

the world was politically fucked up. So I don't know a poem coming out of my body that doesn't have to do with an act that is intending to change or to talk about some kind of oppression or injustice that happens on my body.

I think that it's a very interesting thing. Like who you are, whether you are doing art that is overtly recognizably activism -- it depends on the time and the place in history, I guess. I think if you are a body of color in America and you are speaking out, you're writing your own identity or just writing -- I think that's activism. And I think if you are a body of non-color -- although that's like weird because I look at white woman and I see color when they are naked.

It's this weird space of, if you are speaking some kind of truth -- and truth, of course, is so relative. But the truth that I know and live in. I think that if you are trying to exist outside of the mode of what they present white women as, or white men as.

Like these white boys who come, bleeding hearts to my readings; and they cry and they come to me and they say -- I don't know what to do. Like, I think that is activism. You know what I mean? Like the boyfriends who allow themselves to be dragged by their bisexual partners to my shows.

Like, I think that's activism. When you come and you engage in the dialogue -- that's activism. And it's just weird.

Activism exists on like a continuum. And then you have activism that's like really fucked up and ineffectual.

And then you have activism that's really positive and effective. And I think we all fall along that continuum of where we go and how we exist in a weird kind of way.

Dorothy Allison: But don't lose track of the fact that most of this culture believes that if you combine art and activism, that you are doing something that's not a good or right thing to do. They are always like -- why must you always bring up that political stuff?

(laughter)

Meena Alexander: May I just respond to this art and activism thing? It's something that I had to try and figure out when I was writing poetry in India; because there was so much happening on the streets and there were so many places in which you literally felt your body had to be there on the street, that there was often no time to write.

And I figured out that you have to march on the street; you have to try and make those legislative changes that you were talking about. But then you also have to have that space to do the strange work that you do, which comes out of that life where you stand on the street or you don't.

So I think it's a funny business,

Audience Member: It's interesting to be here . . .

Staceyann Chin: Jamaican!

Audience Member: Hi, girl, how are you doing? My question is -- how do you not censor yourself? And I think like that's something that has been boiling and boiling and boiling within me. Especially like, being so outspoken at home and being known for standing up for people.

I never really have to stand up for myself, but standing up for other people. And then you come here and you have these beliefs -- like, everyone is equal and there should be universal health care. And then you have this professor who is supposed to be like liberal at Swarthmore College.

I don't know where it's supposed to be like, the liberal of the liberal. And then this guy can stand up in front of you and be like - millions of people don't have health care, but I want to get another MRI scan, so screw them; universal health care, no, no, no, no, no.

Like, and then I'm so upset and driven to tears because I know my father worked in a factory and they just cut his health care. And I sit there and I'm quiet and I don't say anything because I don't want to upset my friends beside me.

And second of all, they will start thinking I'm dumb because I hear that -- boy, black people are not doing too well. And I'm talking to myself -- I'm black; does that mean ... I got 1400 on my SATs, I'm just as smart.

(laughter)

But I just want to know, like how do you not censor yourself in a place that censors you? It's so crazy; I'm a poet. But that's a very recent thing. And it is because a lot of pain I've been dealing with. It's not about women's rights and black rights and asian rights and identity rights. It's about the fact that, acknowledge that the person beside you is human and we're all human. And that's something that burns me every day, because I never had to deal with some things.

They don't even have to say it. They just like see you coming and look up in the sky and you feel like shit. Yeah, so how do you not censor yourself? That was my question.

(applause)

Staceyann Chin: And you talk about never having to deal with that kind of reality in Jamaica? My whole life in Jamaica, I never had to deal with that reality. And I walked about and people acknowledged that I was human and they were very good to me and they treated me with mad respect. I was affirmed as a human being, every single day.

And I came to America and I experienced what it felt like not to be acknowledged as a human being, or affirmed as a human being every day. And when I went home, I saw the people in Jamaica who were not being affirmed every day. Because I knew what it felt like, from this side, all of the sudden.

So when I went home, I was able to recognize them. I want to point out that. Maybe Jamaica isn't so much of a utopia; it's not like it doesn't happen there. It's just that maybe you are on the other side. So, I'll look at that. So when I went home I was able to see helpers . . . we called them helpers there because it's kind of innate.

The helpers, I began to see the shadows moving very, very invisibly and quietly in the house. And all of the sudden, I wanted to know whether they had children or who their mothers were or whether they cared about who was Prime Minister or any of those things.

And I still struggle with it. But I just wanted to make sure that you know that maybe it was just your vantage point that was different in Jamaica. That the same thing that happens here, except that it's a very blatant kind of thing and it's tied up with the race.

But in Jamaica it is equally there, but it's just tied up in shades. And the other thing is like -- fuck them. You say "good morning" to him. Say to him one morning -- "why the fuck you don't say good morning?"

(laughter)

Like that's my own take.

Ann Cvetkovich: We're reaching that point where we're on the verge of running out of time, so if people could be quick in

your comments and (inaudible) and people can respond to that?
Do you have a hand up?

Staceyann Chin: I like the girl in the tie?

Audience Member: I think I'm in love, but I'm not a girl.

Speaker: Ah, interesting experience. Go ahead.

Audience Member: I'm actually really diverted and I think that the conversation that was just starting may be more important than the question that I wanted to ask, so I'll throw this out there, and see if that's how it feels to you. The other day, I'm teaching a class at NYU, and one of the core subjects of this class is -- what is critical theory good for?

What does it do? What does it help you do? During the other panel in this room when I heard a question about the relationship between theory and practice. But it seems that some people were experiencing it as suggesting that people who practice don't think.

Which I don't think was necessarily what was being posed. And I've been hearing something really different from you people today, in this latter half of the day, where you seem to be saying that you all think. You make art. But that's what you do and that is a form of action and that is a form of practice, whether or not you call it activism. It's still doing something. It's not sitting around drawing a paycheck, thinking lofty thoughts and never getting out of bed in the morning.

I was wondering -- excuse me, this one makes me hot under the collar -- if any of you have anything to say about the . . . two things. One is -- the implicit charge of elitism in thinking that is important that you take the time to think. And the other is -- whether you do in fact, run into this, often in your practice, in your worlds, in relation to other people making work and people who aren't making work -- as though if you do stop to think, or paint or dance, you're taking something away from a more genuine political struggle somewhere else?

Speaker: (inaudible) hear from a couple more people. You have the mike in your hand right there, right?

Audience Member: I'll ask very quickly -- it just struck me, sort of an undercurrent of some of the things that were said, there is this very complicated relationship between artistic cultural production and reproduction -- the decision to have children. And that's all tied up in the time and the money and the decisions that you make about yourself as a feminist, and what it means to you to have children. And I was just wondering if the panelists wanted to talk a little bit about that relationship between being somebody who produces, an artist; and a woman who reproduces children, and the time and the money disparity there?

Speaker: Are they different?

Speaker: They are different.

Audience Member: Art and activism is my subject. I'm very honored to represent some of the most important artists in the country, and I think it's very hard for artists to be activists because by being activists they frequently lose their job. They don't get paid. They will not be published. They won't be invited to read their poetry or whatever.

And yet, the art that survives the generations is the art that's activism. Whether it's painters or dancers or writers or whatever -- those that go down in history are the ones that fought for a better world. And I think that it's a hard decision to make, but Adrienne Rich does it. Danny Glover does it. Dorothy Allison does it. Barbara Kingsolver does it. **Marty MacDougalman** does it. And I think we have a responsibility, particularly the young people here, to delve into their art. But never forget -- it's not a matter of legislative change. It's a matter of revolutionary change. That's what's going to save the world.

(applause)

Ann Cvetkovich: Okay, one more question down here and then we'll go back to the panel.

Audience Member: Actually, this speaks to the last two or three speakers. I was just coming up with the idea that all art is not activism. But all activism seems to be art.

Ann Cvetkovich: I'm going to invite the panelists to respond any way they want to the comments that have just been made, by way of moving towards closing. And then, Staceyann has agreed to, you have a little poem for us to close on, right? So don't leave because there's a poem coming up.

But before that, anything else anyone wants to say?

(inaudible)

Dorothy Allison: I made notes. But hardest thing I'm having, lately, dealing with is when I speak to young people and go out and teach is explaining to them that right now, at this moment in history, living in the United States of America, you're living in a backwater.

And we're living in a country that is falling behind the rest of the world so quickly in so many ways. It is unbelievable. And we are deliberately being kept ignorant of that fact that you can go anywhere else and there are populations that, while they do not have all the American advantages, have health care, have justice, have recognition.

You can go to the EU now, any of those countries and -- I can go to Europe and marry my girlfriend. It ain't no big deal. I can go to Greece and have surgery and it don't cost much. I can go to Canada and have cancer and get cured, for Christ sake.

We are living in a backwater. We are living in a country that is literally eating itself alive. And there is almost no

recognition of this fact and when we try to talk about it and do some activism about it, you get that response; people look at you funny if you say you're a poet?

If you look at them and say -- well, I'm a poet and I'm a political activist -- and they jump up off their chair. They don't want to be near you at all. You're crazy. But without an enormous amount of struggle, this country is literally sliding into Paris Hilton's back pocket.

That, contrary to rumor, is not a place I want to hang out.

(laughter)

Tammy Rae Carland: I feel like I've lost track of all the great comments and questions, but I wanted to reiterate some things that have resonated with me, from the panel -- I was in the audience -- of this morning. I think Amber might have said this. It's something that I've been thinking a lot about and how I want to define myself as an artist and as a feminist and as a person in this world, which is literally, I think you mirrored this in something that you said.

Which is -- how do we define a movement and a people by its capacity other than its limitations? And I'm really obsessed with this lately and I'm trying to figure out, have an answer for you. But I really think that's a way to move forward. And as somebody who was educated in the '80s, a really kind of post-

modern education, which means I learned how to critique everything and anything.

And I didn't really learn a material history and I had to teach myself that. Which to me is like living with a limitation, constantly -- the question-answering level of consciousness. As opposed to -- believing in one's self, that you might actually have some answers and you might actually hold some truths. And that those could be our capacities and what we're capable of and striving for and moving towards there. And that addresses kind of . . . your comments about anti-intellectualism, which also is anti art-ism. Issues of, being able to hold two things at once, whether it's a creative practice and motherhood; or a teaching career and motherhood.

Or a creative practice and a political practice. And that's what I have to say about that.

Meena Alexander: I just want to say very quickly . . . underlying it is the question of what use is art? And I just have a very simple response -- art is for life. There are many, many forces in this world that everyone here has spoken of or alluded to that have to do with death. But art really is for life.

Staceyann Chin: How have I claimed my lesbianism that is up for discussion? How do I claim my blackness that is Caribbean-ness in America? Like my little motto is, like I

always tell people -- we need to begin to expand our definitions of these identities.

And it comes back to the thing I was saying earlier on that, nobody is kind of transparent. We are not, kind of like, you know, these great fucking expectations that we've been carrying around for centuries about who people are. It's incorrect. So I face a group and they see . . . like my Chinese food. I love a good broccoli with some pork in it, and some white rice.

And you order it and the Chinese fellow comes upstairs because it says -- "deliver to Staceyann Chin." And he opens the door and my afro is huge and he says "Chin?" And I say -- yes. And he goes -- hmm. And he wants to just hand me the money and go away. And I say -- no, my father is Chinese and he lives in Jamaica.

And he says -- Chinese in Jamaica?

And I say -- yes. When slavery ended, they tried to replace the labor with Indians and Chinese. Yes. It's just like, sometimes you know, it doesn't have to be huge and knocking your head against a wall. Sometimes it's like, you know, not like smacking the boy in the cowboy hat on the plane, who makes some kind of stupid comment.

But just take the two minutes to explain to him, so he walks away with the knowledge, as opposed to like -- your anger.

And I find that I change more minds like that; like, I fly first class sometimes; and I'm in there with the eight white men with the crew cuts.

And it's me and like, you know, all the fucking colors that I can manage to be wearing that day.

(laughter)

And he's looking at me like -- are you sure you're in the right seat?

And I turn to him and I say -- are you sure you're in the right seat? This is first class, you know?

(laughter)

And he laughed. And then we begin a conversation and I'm like -- yeah, you never expect somebody like me to be up here. And he's like -- that's true; why is that?

And we begin to talk politics. And it doesn't work that way all the time because sometimes he goes -- hmm -- and looks the other way.

(laughter)

But nine out of ten times, they are wooed by your exoticism. So talk to them. And tell them like -- this is what Asian looks like. It doesn't always look like that. And this is what a lesbian looks like.

Well, we chant -- this is what a feminist looks like. Say to the motherfucker -- yes, this is what a feminist looks like.

Every day. It is a repetitive process. It is a process you do every single day.

It is a repetitive process. It is like raising children. You've got to say it over and over and over again. And sometimes it's upsetting, but think about -- okay, you have to do the same things to make an orgasm happen; you have to do the same things to make change happen.

(laughter and applause)

Ann Cvetkovich: All right, I think we'll move to our closing now -- not that that wasn't a good one. But repetition is good too. Two announcements -- we can actually continue the conversation because there is a reception immediately following us, over in Barnard Hall. Fourth floor.

And also, Blue Stockings, our local activist book store; it was a women's book store. It hung in there and now is an activist book store; support your local book stores. Don't buy on amazon.com -- will be selling books by the people at this conference. So please buy; look out for them.

And if I thought about this better, in deference to the comments about dance, we'd put on a tune and we would all dance as part of our closing. But you can perhaps feel it inside of you. I think that would be okay, right, Staceyann? Are you going to do a poem? So, please?

Staceyann Chin: Yes, yes.

