

ART as a

Revolutionary Tool

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PASS THIS ON TO A FRIEND!

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clamor communiqué #34

A friend once asked me why I couldn't write about anything that wasn't depressing. I looked at her through my eyes—the eyes of a queer woman of color—and wondered if she had finally gone crazy. I took her question home with me and thought about it. Actually, I couldn't *stop* thinking about it. I took out all the notebooks my writings dwelled in. I looked at each one trying to find an ounce of optimism; a sliver of an attitude that said “we'll all be ok.” I grew frustrated and came to the conclusion that perhaps my friend is right. Maybe the world isn't a complete globe of injustice after injustice. Maybe I should write poems and prose celebrating humanity and the accomplishments that have been made. I sat down and put a fresh sheet of paper in my typewriter and began to type the most horrid poems I have ever laid eyes on.

Each poem I wrote that deviated from the truths of capitalism, institutional racism, sexism, heterosexism, and colonialism was a complete lie. How could I create art that didn't lend itself to the dissemination of leftist politics from the perspective of a queer woman of color? How could I create art—meaningful art—if I chose to write about how pretty flowers looked when they were just starting to bloom? I looked toward everything that I thought made me “happy.” I looked toward trees, flowers, the sky, and anything else that would normally exude in me a feeling of joy and peacefulness.

Nothing.

I thought about how musicians, like many other kinds of great artists, tend to evolve in their chosen craft and create different music because they've grown as artists. I remembered that material evolution, to me, makes a truly great artist. My craft wasn't evolving. It was almost as if I had forgotten how to write. I had forgotten what drew me to prose and poetry in the first place. “I must suck” became my mantra. I put away my typewriter in its case and placed in the back of my closet with no intention of ever taking it out again. I looked at my notepads and noticed my vague attempts at writing happy poetry. I swore at it and crumpled up the pages.

Some months later, I came across several poems in a book I remembered loving when I first discovered poetry of resistance. At one point, this had been my passion. I was a voracious reader of poets from the Black Renaissance like Langston Hughes. I couldn't get enough of Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni's “Ego Tripping” about how she, a black woman, was the beginning and the end of everything. I discovered other performance poets that had this poetic quality; this revolutionary love for social change. Alix Olson satisfied my interdisciplinary approach to social justice by talking about queers, sweatshop labor, the NRA, women of color, and the radical right all in one piece. Though I had read many writers from the “third world,” I began to

explore these writers to a greater extent. It was here that social justice issues stopped being issues and started becoming the embodiment of the lives and struggles of the poor, the sick, the hungry, and the exploited. I realized from that moment that to turn my attention and fervor away from writing resistance poetry was like slapping the face to all the sisters of color and queers whom I fight alongside on a daily basis. It was certainly like slapping my own face because of the adversities I have had to experience because of my sexuality or my skin color or the fact that I did not fit in a Korean community or a Puerto Rican community or all of these things at once. I began to understand that my political writing was not the problem. Rather, it was my attempt at trivial writing that was causing the problem. It was my attempt to completely disconnect myself from the work I had previously committed my life to. My writing was no longer empowering to others or to myself. It had no real significance or broader social relevance. It was bland despite that its subject matter was supposed to leave me feeling elated with joy.

When one becomes enlightened about the atrocities of the world; by the fact that young women and girls make up the majority of labor that produces goods for the U.S. *they* can't even afford, that hetero-normativity and white-normativity are standard, that you can barely drink coffee or eat anything containing chocolate without benefiting from and exploiting poor farmers, that the situation for queers really hasn't gotten that much better, that I still exhale flames at the thought of women in the United States having less reproductive rights now than in 1973, that cows are rounded up by the thousands, many killed inhumanely, and wrapped in plastic for our convenience and our money, that the *Vagina Monologues* mean more to many U.S. feminists than the food, healthcare, housing, and education many women abroad *and* in the U.S. don't have, how do you look back? How do you look back and say to yourself that in actuality, my comfort and convenience mean more than the suffering and exploitation of a whole world? I have a simple answer. You don't. And if, with this knowledge, you do not act upon these injustices, as Kwame Ture (a.k.a Stokely Carmichael) said: “If you aren't part of the solution, then you're part of the problem.”

Nowadays, I don't try to write about flowers or blue sky. I took my typewriter out of the closet and my notepads out of a box and into my lap. I write about the injustice in the streets of the United States. I write about the injustices committed by many white, Western feminists towards sisters of color. I write about the injustices of our (in)justice system. I write about the truth.

The next time someone asks me why I don't write about happy things, I'll remember and tell them about the famous, world-renowned poet Nikki Giovanni who once wrote: “I wanted to write / a poem / that rhymes / but revolution doesn't lend / itself to be-bopping.”