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Feminist Manifestos: A Global Documentary Reader. New York: New York University Press, 2018 (ISBN: 978-4798-3730-4)

Reviewed by Chiara Bottici, 2019

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Quote: “The number and breadth of the issues that are specifically feminist in this collection are astonishing, too broad to be enumerated, spanning from the ordination of women as priests to the request for more feminist porn, from the vindication of civil, political, and economic rights to that of being fairly portrayed in the media, from prostitutes’ rights to genetic engineering, from food sovereignty to tools for fighting climate change.”

If it is true that feminism, however one defines it, is a collective movement, why do we devote so little attention to collectively written texts? This certainly reflects the prejudice we have inherited from centuries of embedded institutional patriarchy, which leads us to believe that theory must come from the single mind of intellectuals writing books in the solitary quiet of their studios--a privilege from which women in general, and women of color in particular, have been excluded for too long.

Even more: in a time when feminism has been accused of being mere white privilege, it seems even more important to make sure that theory comes directly from the collective experience of the oppressed, especially from those who are so oppressed that they do not have the time, let alone the means, to write books but who voice their oppression in collective struggles. Why are there no collections of collectively written texts resulting from such struggles? In contrast to books, manifestos are a versatile tool, accessible to at least all literate women and gender-nonconforming people around the globe, easy to circulate, particularly in our internet times, and a crucial tool for creating both feminist spaces and agendas for social movements. So why has no truly global collection of them existed until now?

This book, luckily for us and for the feminist cause, fills such a gap. *Feminist Manifestos: A Global Documentary Reader* stands up to its title and subtitle as it presents a collection of 150 collective documents from feminist groups and organizations from fifty different countries and

with representatives from many others, thanks to the international nature of a lot of those groups, thereby providing a sense of what women worldwide have collectively voiced in their struggles from 1642 to 2016. Although many of the texts collected do not define themselves as “manifestos” (but rather as “petition,” “declaration,” “resolution,” “appeal,” “proclamation,” “statement,” “charter,” “call for change,” “bill of rights,” and “agenda,” to name only a few), the term *manifestos* remains a good umbrella term because all the texts present the main features that we tend to associate with the manifesto: declarations that reveal and criticize a certain status quo and address strategies for bringing about change, done with the direct aim of communicating to the general public as well as a call for action. As such, manifestos are a marginal and subversive writing genre, able to give voice to those excluded from mainstream media.

Precisely because manifesto-writing has been such an important tool in the history of dissent and feminist struggles, all readers with an interest in the feminist cause have probably already encountered a multiplicity of them. What this collection specifically adds is the energizing and reinvigorating experience of reading 150 of these texts one after the other, jumping from the 1817 Cherokee women’s petition against forced deportation to the 2010 Peruvian men’s declaration against gender violence, from the 1975 New York Wages for Housework declaration to the 1994 Zapatista Women Revolutionary Laws, from the 1848 Viennese Democratic Women Association’s statutes to the 2010 Afghan Women Declaration against the Taliban regime or the 2001 INCITE Declaration from gender-nonconforming people of color against the gender violence systematically perpetrated on their bodies within the California prison complex--just to highlight a handful of possible journeys through these 676 pages of feminist voices.

Depending on one’s own location, some texts will be familiar and expected by the reader, but others will come as a surprise, as it did for me to read the “Resolutions” of the Women Ordination Worldwide First International Conference, written in Dublin in 2001 and attesting to the global scale of the movement to promote the ordination of women priests in Catholic countries. Whatever specific reaction one may have to this or that declaration, it is the amazing force and energy springing from reading 150 of them all together that most commends this collection. I am an academic, and I can clearly perceive the importance of this book as a tool for scholarly research, but I strongly believe that what makes it a “must read” for us all is its power to inspire feminist struggles. It is a book that should be available to every woman and gender-nonconforming person, in every language, so that whenever one gets depressed by the sheer amount of work that needs to be done (and there is a lot of work to be done), one can always open this single volume for the soothing reassurance that we have been, and still are, in the billions of us, fighting together: whether it is migrant women in Italy, LBT women in Fiji, gender-nonconforming people in California, Ghanaian feminists, or Saturviit Inuit women, we are all fighting for the end of the oppression of women and other gender minorities, and knowing about the diversity of our struggles and needs can only illuminate the degree to which men remain the sovereign sex.

This should not take anything away from the scholarly value of this book. To begin with, every text is accompanied by an introduction that contextualizes that manifesto, providing crucial information about the circumstances of its composition, about the place as well as, when applicable, the history of the organizations or the meetings from which they derive. In addition to providing contextualization and outlining each manifesto’s main points, these introductions at

times become little mini-commentaries, with footnotes and quotations from other scholars, which also help situate the texts in current feminist debates.

For example, the introduction to three petitions of the Cherokee women from 1817, 1818, and 1821 explains that Native American women at that time had probably more authority than their European counterparts, and quotes previous scholarship on how gender equality declined due to colonialism and the spread of Christianity, despite the fact that matrilineal inheritance and matrilineal culture remained the norm in many native communities (47). This is particularly useful for understanding the petitions themselves, which, in contrast to the European texts of the period, do not focus on the vindication of certain rights, but just proceed in their exercise by voicing specific political views to the Women Council. But it is also extremely useful for understanding how the invocation of the authority of indigenous motherhood first accompanies but is later replaced by that of Christian authority, and how this also goes together with the progressive internalization of the “savages” versus “civilized” dichotomy that played such a constitutive role in the founding myth of the Anglo-European settler state: whereas this civilization rhetoric is absent in the first petition, the second relies on it, arguing that by accepting removal from their land, Cherokee women risk losing the advantages and privileges of “civilized” life reached through farming and will relapse into a “pre-enlightened” state (49).

Besides providing significant information on specific feminist movements, the book also offers an important portrait of feminist struggles as a whole. Most important, it does it on a global scale, both geographically and thematically. The number and breadth of the issues that are specifically feminist in this collection are astonishing, too broad to be enumerated, spanning from the ordination of women as priests to the request for more feminist porn, from the vindication of civil, political, and economic rights to that of being fairly portrayed in the media, from prostitutes’ rights to genetic engineering, from food sovereignty to tools for fighting climate change.

Another aspect that struck me while reading the entire series of manifestos is the growing awareness of the globe as a theater of women’s and other gender-nonconforming people’s fights. Whereas manifestos addressing local conditions of specific feminist struggles are a constant throughout the 150 texts collected, there is also progressively more space for those that openly address the global scope and breadth of their struggles. This is not evident just in thematically global issues at the center of declarations such as the Global Conference on Indigenous Women and Climate Change (Mandaluyong City, Philippines, November 18-19, 2010) or the International Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network (September 20-23, 2013), but also in the rise in numbers and visibility of movements aspiring to be truly global in their inception, such as the Women’s Assembly of the World Social Forum (Bélem do Para, Brazil, January 27-February 1, 2009) or the Meeting of the World March of Women (Kigali, Rwanda, December 10, 2004).

These are only some of the scholarly merits of this valuable book, and it is perhaps impossible to list all of them because every feminist will find in *Feminist Manifestos* a particularly useful set of information according to their different sensibilities and experiences of oppression. I could sum up what I have witnessed reading the book in the slogan: “Global is the oppression, so global has

to be the fight.” But different readers may, and will, learn different things; this only attests to the vitality, creativity, and wide-ranging spectrum of feminist struggles past and present.

As a white, cis-gendered woman of European origins, who migrated to the settler colonial territory once known as Turtle Island and now known as the United States, I am extremely grateful to Penny A. Weiss and all those who helped her to put together this book, which is an important contribution to feminist scholarship and feminist activism alike.