

CHERRY SMILEY – THE NEW MISOGYNY

Cherry Smiley- Thompson tribe- Intlakapmuch- Navajo/Dine

Thank you to everyone who has come here today to listen, learn, and question the idea of gender and how it impacts women and girls. Thank you to the panelists and organizers who put this event together. A special thank you to my sister-in-struggle Saba for inviting me to speak through this letter and for sharing her time with me.

What I had wanted to speak about today was the ways in which transgender ideology is being uncritically accepted in culture, law, and policy and the ways in which Indigenous women are silenced by trans-activism. In universities and among activists today, I often hear that pre-colonization, Indigenous cultures had many genders and transgender- or two-spirit-identified individuals were respected and held leadership positions.

Maybe this was true in some nations but it wasn't true for all nations. Generally we find 3rd, 4th, 5th genders in cultures where gender roles are very rigid. My grandmother, historical research, and common sense tells me that many, if not most, nations had less rigid ideas about gender, not more. To have one sex dependent on the other for basic needs seems more a reflection of modern culture than anything else. For example, if only men knew how to hunt and hunted, what would happen if a number of men were injured or ill or died? What would happen in the middle of a tough winter when everyone needed to pitch in? It would make sense that most members of a nation, female and male, would need to know how to survive and be able to put that knowledge into practice. This would mean less rigid ideas about gender.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, why does it matter? I used to believe very strongly that most Indigenous nations in Canada were matriarchal and that women were respected and held leadership positions. Maybe this was true in some nations but it wasn't true for all nations. At the time, this claim served my belief. After some serious self-reflection, I've come to understand that I was mistaken to rely on this claim to advocate for the liberation of Indigenous women and girls. These kinds of claims, whether they work for our beliefs or not, silence discussion. In particular, the claims about gender and transgendered-identified individuals being leaders and revered medicine people pre-colonization work to silence feminist women who want to abolish gender. "It used to be this way so it should be this way" is an impossible claim to prove, politically lazy, abandons women from historically patriarchal cultures, and has been long used to justify male violence against women and girls in many cultures, including ours today. Also and importantly what I know from my grandmother is that in

intlakapmuch culture homosexuality was accepted but also there was an understanding that female and male bodies are different. Male bodied people were not allowed into female ceremonies or sacred rites. and vice versa.

Indigenous women in Canada fought for decades for a national inquiry into murdered and disappeared Indigenous women and girls and when we got that national inquiry it became about women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA communities, emphasis on the 2SLGBTQQIA communities, without any notice or discussion. We were told to make sure men who identified as 2SLGBTQQIA were included and disproportionate amounts of time, resources, and energy went into discussing everyone else but Indigenous women in our own inquiry. If the issue of male violence against Indigenous 2SLGBTQQIA communities is as pressing as claimed, an appropriate strategy would have been to demand a separate inquiry on that issue so that it could be thoroughly examined. There are specific historical and contemporary reasons and solutions as to why women and girls, particularly Indigenous women and girls, are harmed and attacked by men.

I don't believe in the idea of a gender identity. Biology is a material reality, human beings cannot change sex, and men oppress women on the basis of our sex. Gender is made-up rules, limitations, and expectations that harm women and benefit men. To say we are each born with a gender identity is an idea that can and should be debated and its impacts on our material realities as women examined with a feminist analysis. This is a very important point. The idea of gender should not be examined in isolation. When it is, those critical of gender identity are often right-wing, conservative, and/or religious men from organizations that advocate for sexist, racist, and classist policies that hurt women. The debate around gender is important for feminists because it forms a foundation for our movement. How can we even begin to form a feminist analysis that centres women if we are pressured to believe anyone is a woman and we are told to include and prioritize men who identify as transgender women in our work. How can we fight for women and girls when we are not allowed to set our own priorities and boundaries in regard to our politics, organizing, and safety? This has broader implications for other oppressed communities We need to take a stand on this issue but always in the context of working toward women's liberation in a patriarchy and always with the knowledge there is lots of work to do on many issues.

Indigenous women who don't say and do what white people wants us to say and do are being silenced. I've personally experienced online harassment, been denied opportunities, kicked off stages and out of conferences, threatened with police, threatened by men, and so much more, often by academics and activists, because I have

different beliefs and different political analyses of an issue – gender - that impacts everyone. The message this sends is that Indigenous women are only welcome to speak if we say what you want us to say. To this I say no deal. Disagree with me, challenge me, but I am allowed to say that I love and fight for women and girls. I am allowed to say what I think and that's what I'm going to do.