

Authenticity: Myth or Reality

*"Our desire to conform is greater than
our respect for objective facts"*

By Ms. Krystal T. Brown

I imagine this would mean that we want to be like everyone else, even when our inner truth tells us we should not be like everyone else. Why do we let the pressures of society force us to "conform," to tone down an aspect of our personality so we fit in with the mainstream? Who decides what is and isn't socially acceptable? And, in a culture that often unfairly demands conformity, how can we present our authentic selves? It should be noted that many West Indians today are exhausted with identity politics. We are at the same time trying to protect individual identity while balancing the rights of others. As the West Indies becomes more and more diverse culturally we are seeing that the struggle for authenticity is far fetch. In Michele Alexandre's – *Dance Halls, Masquerades, Body Protest & The Law: The Female Body As A Redemptive Tool Against Trinidad's Gender Biased Laws*²⁸¹ (here after Body Protest); Kenji Yoshino's – *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*²⁸² (here after Covering) and Kathryn Abram's – *From Autonomy To Agency: Feminist Perspectives on Self Determination*²⁸³ (here after Autonomy to Agency) we see that the human self is incapable of authenticity in society. Through these literary works, I will argue that the authentic self is a myth as we are constantly conforming to exist in a mainstream world. The notion of authenticity fits into a utopian ideology. It is a fantasy, like the tooth fairy, that can never be attained and exist only in our imagination. This area is of great

²⁸¹ 13 Duke J. of Gender L.& Policy 177 (2006)

²⁸² (2006), Preface, ix-xii, An Uncovered Self pp.3-27

²⁸³ (1999) 40 Williams and Mary L Rev 805

importance in that those who advocate for social reform value the study of authenticity. Following, is a critical look at the articles.

For centuries, history has created images of the temptress, who uses the awareness of their bodies' power as a form of manipulation. The history of women using their feminine wiles, so to speak, to have a piece of the pie in this man's world is not a new phenomenon. The biblical story for example, of Sampson and Delilah is a clear indication that woman were viewed as sophisticated seducers. Sampson is a herculean figure, who is granted tremendous strength through the spirit of the Lord to combat his enemies and perform heroic feats unachievable by ordinary men²⁸⁴. Delilah in Hebrew meaning "one who has weakened" is the woman that Sampson loved and who eventually was responsible for his downfall. She betrayed Sampson by revealing his secret of his strength to his enemies in exchange for money.

Michele Alexandre dared to take up a challenge illustrating that while this may seem as a story of manipulation, it is actually a celebration of the power and redemptive qualities of women's bodies. Alexandre, a graduate of Colgate University and Harvard Law School is an Assistant Professor of Law at the University Of Memphis Cecil C. Humphries School Of Law. Her teaching interests include feminist legal theory. Professor Alexandre's prior professional experience includes serving as a civil rights attorney. Her publications include *Body Protest; Big Love: Is Feminist Polygamy an Oxymoron or a True Possibility?*²⁸⁵, *Human Rights Still Matter? Oxford Round Table's Forum on Public Policy and Love Don't Live Here Anymore: Economic Incentives for More Equitable Models of Urban Redevelopment*²⁸⁶.

²⁸⁴ Ronald Brownrigg (1993) *Who's Who in the Bible: The Old Testament & the Apocryptic, The New Testament*. New York: Wing Books, Old Testament 317

²⁸⁵ 18 HSTWLJ 3

²⁸⁶ Forthcoming in the Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review in December 2007

In *Body Protest*, Alexandre's article examines feminist jurisprudence considering the female body as a tool for redemption and liberation against sexism and patriarchy. Women that have expressed themselves through their bodies have traditionally been labeled as loose and oversexed by both men and women. (p.177) Alexandre notes in her work that such judgment is the existence of sexual profiling eminent in all cultures. One culture she pays particular attention to is Trinidadian women. Trinidadian women use of their bodies as a mode of expression and as a device and transformation is referred to as "body protest". The article suggests that by reading or rather connecting through these women's bodies, this should lead society to embrace our own consciousness of sexism and liberation. The strength of the commentary highlights that likening the female body as a redemptive device can lead to a more authentic self. Another strength is the cry for possible reform to address Trinidad's specific problem experienced by women in the region. Alexandre's definition of body protest analyzes therapeutic thoughts of womanhood in revolt against patriarchal society. Instances of body protest include certain women choosing to dance suggestively, dressing contrary so societal standards of propriety, performing sexually explicit artistic roles, bringing attention to specific body parts and adopting sexually explicit personas in order to highlight the societal restrains imposed on them (p.179).

However, Alexandre fails to consider that these so called "body protesters" may not be protesting at all and that these women may have entirely non-existent views on the subject. Also, she fails to acknowledge an issue that plagues Caribbean societies of women having to resort to prostitution engaging in sexual favors in exchange for money. The prostitute is not protesting at all, but rather believes that she has no other way to survive. Alexandre also does not mention the consequences of body protest and the disadvantages of this new revolutionary autonomy. Her influence of this piece may have something to do with the Kobe Bryant Case in 2003 where the Supreme Court brought up irrelevant areas of the victims life. Also, television shows such as Jerry Springer's and Maury Proviches capitalizing on women's economic despair.

Overall, Alexandre seems to recognize that by weaving together the variety of discourse of sexual profiling that women encounter daily in the social, political and familial spheres of their lives and her theory of body protest, she had revolutionized how feminist would proceed and how many new reforms would be made. She compares and contrasts United States concerns with those of Trinidad and Tobago. She challenges the existence of a range of acceptable morality practices that are generally used to evaluate women's behaviors and justifying sexual profiling. Alexandre makes the reader appreciate that there is room for change despite mainstream pressure.

In the preface of *Covering* Kenji Yoshino writes, to cover is to downplay a disfavored trait so as to blend into the mainstream. Because all of us possess stigmatized attributes, we all encounter pressure to cover in our daily lives. Yoshino is the Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor at the NYU School of Law. A specialist in constitutional law, antidiscrimination law and law and literature, he has published in major academic journals, such as *Columbia Law Review* and the *Yale Law Journal*. *Covering* has received an array of academic achievement, for instance, the Randy Shilts Award for Gay Non-fiction from the Publishing Triangle in 2007.

In this elegant article, autobiography is the major component. Yoshino's work is a hybrid of legal jurisprudence and a poetic memoir calling for a redefinition in our law and culture. He defines covering as "to tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream" (preface ix). His arguments centers on the issue that the demand to cover can pose a hidden threat to our civil rights. He demonstrates that racial minorities are pressed to "act white" by changing their names, languages, or cultural practices. Women are told to "play like men" at work. Gays are asked not to engage in public display of same-sex affection. The devout are instructed to minimize expressions of faith and individuals with disabilities are urged to conceal paraphernalia that permit them to function. Yoshino argues that the law has generally ignored the threat posed by these covering demands. He observes that since we

all experience these covering demands, we can come to a common cause based on our desire for authenticity. In society today race, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion and disability are all protected by rights, but we still deny equal treatment for the “authentic seekers” who refuse to downplay or mute along those lines.

A distinguishing strength of the article is Yoshino challenges many of the conventional liberalism. He argues against the assimilation of America into different identity groups. He draws on his expertise as a lawyer to articulate the limits of what the law can and cannot do. He holds that the desire for authenticity is likened to the conservative and the liberal because it focuses on the struggle for the authentic self that exists within us all. His arguments are deeply rooted in personal experiences as a gay Asian-American and given that the article highlights inauthenticity. He had to risk seeming vulnerable to properly postulate his argument. Borrowing the term “covering” from an important American social-psychologist Irving Goffman, Yoshino shows how minorities are required to recover to adjust in a mainstream world to avoid violence, keep their jobs, gain social acceptance and so on. He associates his own personal experience, rather gay experience, as a formula to identify the different phases of acceptance: conversion, passing and finally covering. He precisely affords the reader the opportunity to demonstrate what is problematic to force people to assimilate or to “become mainstream”. A salient point is Yoshino identifies that women are required to “reverse cover” as they are often required to act out their feminine role rather than cover it up. A prime example is in the workplace, women are required both to cover their femininity and to enact femininity at the same time.

As there are profound strengths of the article, I could not help but construe that a weakness of the piece is that Yoshino feels passionately that the burden should be on the state rather than on the individual to struggle to find their authentic self. He fails to convey to his audience that law can undermine us and entrench inequalities. More importantly he fails to establish that there are

limits to the law. Another crucial limitation is Yoshino points out that gays may be more attuned to the discriminatory aspects of assimilation because they are capable of assimilating in more ways than racial minorities or women. Yet, he later maintains that racial minorities and women are routinely asked to cover and these groups are most vulnerable.

Much of Yoshino's influences originate around his struggles to understand himself and making some life altering decisions relating to career between law and literature and whether to be Asian or American. He is also on a struggle to find his authentic self. He chooses law school as a way out, believing that as a gay poet he will be too vulnerable and that the law will protect him. As a professor at Yale Law School he feels the need to play down his sexual orientation by avoiding gay examples when teaching constitutional law. He is deeply traumatized by society's suggestion that he should be a "homosexual professional" and not a "professional homosexual". Although "coming out", he still felt the pressure to cover and act as though being gay had no effect on his life. He described many ways he felt to cover his gay identity. He found it much easier to conform than being "real".

What I found most hopeful about the article is Yoshino offers his struggle for authenticity as an encouragement for everyone to do somewhat of a "soul searching" to identify the ways in which we have covered ourselves. One feels inspired, as he presents his struggle for the authentic self. He realizes that even after "coming out" he still feels alienated and is not living authentically. Why, because it is a myth.

Liberal theorist suggests that there lies a "true self" within us all that it remains translucent and is immune to social conditions. However, they contend that this authentic self is not in isolation from others and it is difficult to see how the "self" could develop without a great deal of help from others and our social experiences. In *Autonomy to Agency*, Abrams objects to the viewpoints of the liberal theorist that regardless of circumstances, human beings can or ought to be autonomous. These criticisms

have led to the ideas of liberal theorist having been rejected. In Abrams commentary, she argues ways that the liberal norm of autonomy has been modified or rather “reconstructed” by its encounters with contemporary feminist theory.

Abrams, professor of law at Cornell Law School is a nationally recognized scholar on feminist jurisprudence. In her popular Feminism and Gender Discrimination course, she introduces students to a range of feminist theories that have shaped legal thought and doctrine. She discusses such gender specific issue as sexual harassment, abortion, rape and pornography and the way they have been addressed by the legal system. A proclaimed author of several dozen articles on such topics as employment discrimination, feminist jurisprudence and minority-vote dilution, she is currently working on a book. The book promises to explore the ways in which feminist legal theory depicts women’s agency or capacity for self direction, under circumstances of oppression.

Abrams identifies that there are various different perspectives of autonomy in a liberal feminist jurisprudence. She focuses on discussions of autonomy by Joel Feinberg and Gerald Dworkin. She also narrows in on a selection of feminist perception as Diana Myers, of how women express their autonomy under conditions of oppression. A notable strength of the article is Abrams calling attention to social realities that abstract literal theory may overlook. Her discussion challenges liberals to consider whether and how liberal theory should be modified in the light of a more sensitive awareness of social conditions that fall far short of their ideals. (pp.11-14) Abrams contends that liberal theorist have developed their conceptions of autonomy at some distance from those attributes of human subjects such as emotional or relational interdependence and strong gender-related socialization, that bear heavily on the lives of women (p.17). Abrams prefers using the term “agency” rather than “autonomy” because autonomy is viewed as a collective enterprise rather than an individual enterprise. However, agency does not deny the possibility of self definition or self direction among women or others. These terms are all synonymous with authenticity.

“Authenticity”, “Self” and “Autonomy” has been salient in feminist philosophy for it addresses question about personhood, identity and body. Women’s authenticity has been subordinated through the law, customary practices, cultural stereotypes and societal norms. “Authenticity is achieved when an individual’s judgments emanate from motivational structure that he identifies as his own” (p 4). I will attempt to highlight three perspectives why human subjects existing authentically are a myth.

Firstly, many times even when people claim to be authentic they are still choosing to be partially real or authentic. Are these people being 100% real or just choosing how “real” they want to be and yet still claiming “true authenticity”. Authenticity is a characteristic of a human subjects internally and acts or choices externally. Adams notes that, “the self is formed prior to social interaction, is not fundamentally shaped by group membership or affiliation and is capable of autonomous choice.” (p8) In other words, people have a history that is subject to the influence of others and subjectively makes choices based on his or her obligations. Thus, how can the “self” be 100% authentic? I believe we choose to be partially real. The problem with striving for authenticity is that it creates unrealistic desires for your fullest potential.

In addition, authenticity can make some skeptical to be “real”. Those striving to live authentically often lead unusual lives that oppose cultural norms. However, many have pointed out that just because one lives unusually, one is not necessarily in an authentic state of being. For instance, Alexandre’s body protester’s whose use of the female body was a tool of expression for liberation. *Body Protest* illustrates how women are struggling against oppression. It is a passionate defense of self against a patriarchal society. These women are not conforming. Are they products of the authentic self? I believe like many, they negotiate and validate identities to exist in a mainstream world. Yoshino too, was hesitant about being his authentic self. Struggling with his sexuality, career and race, he began to feel more like a tenant than a resident in his own body (p8).

Finally, authenticity is a two fold process; first, being “real” with your inner self and second being “real” with others. If authenticity can be described in very abstract terms, what can be said about it directly? The trend is that authenticity is something to be pursued as a goal intrinsic to “the good life”. Yet it is often described as an intrinsically difficult state to achieve mainly because of social pressures. Some feminist argues that authenticity alters a person’s relationship with others. A person’s authentic self is deemed to come with its own set of morals and obligations, which often exist regardless of race, gender and class. For example, Abrams through the work of liberal feminist takes as her focus the life of a “traditional woman”: one who is strongly socialized to feminine norms and devoted herself primarily to the care of her family. This woman is marked by several characteristics that would disqualify her as an authentic self (p5). There are elements everywhere that threaten the traditional woman’s authenticity.

The issue of authenticity has long been of great importance in feminist philosophy. As I suggested, the struggle for authenticity is a myth as we are constantly conforming to exist in a mainstream world. Responding to this state of affairs, liberal feminist should alter their focus to 1) address the established views of the self acknowledging “true” authenticity is fallacious; 2) reclamation of selfhood among women and 3) re-conceptualization of the authentic self to incorporate women’s everyday experiences. We must emphasize that authenticity fits into a utopian society and move away from such unfeasible beliefs.