

Trans and Women's Action Camp Reportback: A Transgender Perspective. By Ariel Howland

The Trans and Women's Action Camp* (TWAC) is an annual campout in the woods with workshops, tree climb trainings, a shared kitchen, social activities, time around the campfire, and a post-camp action. It is an event for all transgender and gender variant people as well as all women (trans and cis). Workshops covered topics such as writing press releases, strategic campaigning, unschooling, transphobia, ableism, environmental racism, plant walks, supporting survivors of partner abuse, blockades, radical cheerleading, and many other topics. TWAC started as a way to empower transgender people and cisgender women within Earth First! This spring saw the first TWAC in Florida. A TWAC in Maine is currently being planned.

This was my fifth time attending TWAC in Oregon. I look forward to it all year because it's the only big event where I can be completely comfortable as a radical transgender & genderqueer woman. While TWAC as a whole makes some mistakes they are putting a lot of effort into including transgender folks including trans women. I applaud that. What follows are my opinions and experience and don't represent anyone but myself.

Last year, I called out the atmosphere of the camp for unaddressed transphobia and transmisogyny.** I was able to make that call out because I felt safe enough to do so. I've had much bigger issues in other settings but didn't feel empowered enough to confront the issue. While not everything was fixed this year I definitely saw a lot of progress on this front. I would like future TWAC's to be more conscious about advertising and outreach regarding trans people, especially trans women. I also know the name is a barrier to many trans folks attending.

TWAC was a lot more friendly and welcoming for trans women and other people on the trans-feminine spectrum this year. The camp was welcoming towards femininity in general which was refreshing to see in an activist setting. I also felt validated in my identity as a butch dyke which rarely happens for me. The workshop I co-presented with Lichen on transmisogyny and exclusion of trans people from radical activist communities was well attended and taken seriously. People were making jokes about the pronoun check-ins during the morning circle. After I brought up how this is a frequent way trans people are disrespected the behavior stopped. I appreciated the enthusiasm for listening and attempting to be inclusive, even though some people didn't know much about trans issues.

I was very impressed with the amount of fundraising for this camp. Hundreds of dollars were available for travel stipends. Barriers to organizing created by class don't get addressed enough. Including people with less financial resources is more complicated than just travel stipends but it is a huge step in addressing this issue. Food was available for everyone at camp with consideration for allergies and other dietary needs. Kids and teens were also present at TWAC and were mixed in with everyone else. I'm not a parent but I was glad to see that parents

weren't expected to pay for outside childcare and that kids weren't kept in an isolated childcare area.

Many people told me the environmental racism workshop was very good but I didn't get to attend. A woman of color organizer working in Manchester (a mostly POC neighborhood in Houston) discussed environmental racism and how the tar sands were impacting the area. From what I remember from last year there were more people of color attending this year and more POC workshop presenters. I was disappointed that a few of the workshops focused on racism didn't happen. I never found out why. I'm white and don't feel qualified to judge whether TWAC has improved, gotten worse, or stayed about the same in regard to racism but I know some things that have been called out before haven't been addressed.

It was nice to see that there were two different workshops about ableism. This is a much needed conversation in the environmental movement and I'm glad some folks at TWAC are having it. Some important attempts were made to make the camp more accessible to people with disabilities. Still I wish the camp was a lot more accessible. TWAC is a wonderful space and I want it to be available for more people.

Many radical eco activists don't prioritize accessibility because they want to have action camps in a backwoods setting. I understand the perks of this. However we can't afford not to bring more people in. This is both the right thing to do and the practical thing to do. We need more people to help with the hard work of creating change. Environmental injustice is a major cause of poverty and disability. People with disabilities should be welcome in environmental movements period. In order to help address this I suggest some TWAC's and other eco radical spaces be organized in urban settings.

Having only women and trans people around to do climb trainings, lead workshops, plan actions, etc was very empowering. I can't count how many times cis men have dominated a space I've been in. There was a positive and friendly atmosphere for most of the camp that wasn't super cliquey. Being cliquey and not engaging people of color at TWAC was a criticism that was brought up last year. A fun sing-along of 90's pop songs around the campfire especially stood out. It was also nice to experience clothing optional camping and trips to the river without feeling self-conscious about being a nude woman with a transsexual body. I enjoyed the atmosphere of mutual respect and caring, the cooperation, and the participatory style.

The project of TWAC and the attempt to put ideals into practice that it represents are very important to me. TWAC is an essential part of creating a fun and empowering culture of resistance. TWAC brings in many new faces and provides an easy reentry point for folks who have been burnt out by bad experiences in radical communities. TWAC is far from perfect and has a lot of internal work to do but compared to most radical gatherings I've been to it is amazing.

*Sometimes the “women” in trans and women’s action camp is spelled “womyn” and other times “women.” Many trans people associate the “y” spelling of women with transphobic events such as the “Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival” and transphobic strains of feminism. Therefore I don’t use the “y” spelling.

**Transmisogyny is the overlap between misogyny and transphobia that specifically targets trans women and trans-feminine spectrum people.

For more info about TWAC and the anti-tar sands action, check out the TWAC website.

<http://twac.wordpress.com/>

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