

Speech given by Joan Nestle – GALFA Melbourne Launch  
9<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

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I honor the Wurrengeri people on whose land, and dreams, we stand

When I had to choose which books to take with me from my New York home of over 60 years, this book, an old battered copy of Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," leapt into my hand. This book, written in 1855 and censored for many years, is my Bible; in it I have found words for almost every public gay occasion and tonight, the old gray gay poet came to my aid once again.

A poem by Walt Whitman, the queer vagabond singer of democracy, of physical longings and of the wonder of our need for each other:

"To Rich Givers"

What you give me I cheerfully accept,

A little sustenance, a hut and garden, a little money,

As I rendezvous with my poems,

A traveler's lodging and breakfast as I journey through the States—

Why should I be ashamed to own such gifts? Why to advertise for them?

For I myself am not one who bestows nothing upon man and woman.

For I bestow upon any man or woman the entrance

To all the gifts of the universe.

Just think, "the entrance to all the gifts of the universe," an apt description of what philanthropy can be.

Thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this launching of new possibilities, new dreaming, new inclusions—for that is what our philanthropy in its modern setting promises. Philanthropy is the site where private success can become a public good, where communities give birth to their own futures.

Why we need Galfa—in a different century, in 1998, in a different city, I wrote, "We live in a society that still debates almost every aspect of our lives in the daily newspapers. There we learn which religion has decided not to allow gay touch or marriages, who cannot adopt or have children, who can or cannot serve in the military, which children's book should be allowed on the shelves of public libraries or not,

which right wing candidate has announced no gay person will ever serve in his administration, which state has repealed its laws prohibiting discrimination against gay people.

We are the most present and most absent of peoples in many nations' debate over human rights—in this country religious groups fight to preserve their right to discriminate against gay people particularly in education and health care. Just two months ago, John Howard said in the 2009 Menzies lecture he delivered in Perth that he was able to ban same-sex marriage because Australia lacked a bill of rights. Thus, huge national curtains are drawn to shut out the spectre of our human rights. We need GALFA because the most vulnerable of our communities, the young, the elderly, the disabled, are often the most hard hit by homophobia in public institutions—I think of the brilliant researcher who has to struggle every year to convince funding agencies that research into the needs of gay young people, into what makes them happy as well as sad, what makes them want to live as well as to die, is a deserving field of inquiry. Here I want to say that it has always been easier to get funds to investigate our suffering, our medicalization, rather than how to increase our joy in life—just think, encouraging queer, lesbian, transgendered joy.

We need GALFA because we are complexly gendered communities, many of us do not fit into the binary concepts of men and women and this is a rich gift to our societies, but a gift that is not fully appreciated. We stand on the frontiers of the future of multiple genders, all worthy of social interest and respect. GALFA promises to be inclusive in its generosities, in its imaginings of what the future of desire and identity may look like. I do not have to tell you of the bashings, the ridicule, the humiliations our perceived differences have earned us over the generations. GALFA can become a source of answering dignity.

We need GALFA, because in the face of economic disasters and budget short falls, LGBT concerns will fall very low in the nation's agenda –we need some autonomy of means to keep our social systems of support green.

When I was asked to help launch GALFA, I immediately said but I don't have money to give—I have ideas, I have experience, 70 years of being queer—co-founding the Lesbian Herstory archives in 1973 in NYC—the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc—a not- for- profit research center which through grassroots campaigns, the can in the kitchen to collect loose change for good causes, through thousands of small donations, was able to buy a brownstone in Brooklyn in the early 90s and pay it off quicker than the bank had ever experienced—the archives is still flourishing 35 years later—but that is another story—of course, GALFA needs people to share their wealth , to fund the funding—but I would like our philanthropic undertaking to be marked by multiple understandings of what constitutes a people's wealth. We need the wealth of young queer people to become involved in this dreaming of the future, their enthusiasm, their advice about their needs, is crucial to us, we need the wealth of your support, of spreading the word, of thinking about how to help raise funds and consciousness about queer philanthropy, about grassroots giving, about respect for the small donations as well as a desire for larger ones. We need the poets, the artists of all kinds. Every one of you here tonight can help with this project—in a myriad of ways. We can take care of each other without invoking the old hierarchies of privilege, we can provide a lineage of hope –that is what funding can do—just think of what we have been enduring for so many years—I think of a line from the American statesman and writer,

Frederick Douglass, born to an enslaved African woman, in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, humiliated and curtailed by years of enforced labor, he eventually broke open his captivity and became a great emancipator , as he wrote in his narrative, when he came into the consciousness of his right to a full life, “that which he [the slave owner] most hated, I most desired, that which he most feared was life

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to me.” I do see queer philanthropy as a radical act, open to all to participate in, (not just gay people) as a re-visioning of what a society values, of the expansion of human possibilities—as the old gray gay poet said, as an “entrance to all the gifts of the universe.”