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Disrupters:Three Women of Color Tell Their Stories

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Abstract

This essay is an amplified version of the presentation we made at the 7th Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues. Our aim is to story back into the world our first experiences and motivations for investing in suffrage and democratic activism. We are three American professors of disciplines in the humanities, who for decades have taught and lived across the United States and have traveled the world. Yuko Kurahashi's essay tells the story of how Raichō Hiratsuka and Fusae Ichikawa, Japanese activists in their suffrage and peace movements, helped shape her personal and professional life. Denise Harrison talks about the first wave of Black suffragists, the precursors of today's powerful black women activists who inspire her. Dulce María discusses how Latina writers and activists modeled personal political power and activism and helped her define her hybrid identity. By presenting our stories, we want to highlight issues that most women of color address: We hope that this essay fosters deep thinking about how each of us can harness and multiply the power of our life circumstances to engage in activist work for social justice. We want to speak our truths in the hope that other people, including young women of color, begin to examine how they can use their own stories and identities to help empower the disenfranchised and impoverished, and thereby to question the past, disrupt the present, and contribute to building a more equitable future.

Keywords

Disrupters, Women of Color, Storytelling

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We want to thank Susan G. Larkin for her support with all things technical and her excellent facilitation.

DISRUPTERS: THREE WOMEN OF COLOR TELL THEIR STORIES

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This essay is an amplified version of the presentation we made at the 7th Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues. Our aim is to story back into the world our first experiences and motivations for investing in suffrage and democratic activism. We are three American professors of disciplines in the humanities, who for decades have taught and lived across the United States and have traveled the world. Yuko Kurahashi's essay tells the story of how Raichō Hiratsuka and Fusae Ichikawa, Japanese activists in their suffrage and peace movements, helped shape her personal and professional life. Denise Harrison talks about the first wave of Black suffragists, the precursors of today's powerful Black women activists who inspire her. Dulce María discusses how Latina writers and activists modeled personal political power and activism and helped her define her hybrid identity. By presenting our stories, we want to highlight issues that most women of color address: We hope that this essay fosters deep thinking about how each of us can harness and multiply the power of our life circumstances to engage in activist work for social justice. We want to speak our truths in the hope that other people, including young women of color, begin to examine how they can use their own stories and identities to help empower the disenfranchised and impoverished, and thereby to question the past, disrupt the present, and contribute to building a more equitable future.[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Our aim in this essay is to story back into the world our first experiences and motivations for investing in suffrage and democratic activism. We are three American professors of disciplines in the humanities, who for decades have taught and lived across the United States and have travelled the world. We are friends. Yuko Kurahashi and Denise A. Harrison met at Kent State University, where they both teach. Yuko and Dulce María Gray have known each other for 35 years, since they were in their graduate programs at Indiana University. To mark the centennial of the 19th amendment, Denise, a fourteenth-generation Black American activist, and Yuko, an immigrant from Japan, envisioned gathering a small group of multiracial activists who could speak about the women who inspired them to fight for women's rights. They invited Dulce María, an immigrant who arrived in New York City early in childhood. We asked Susan Larkin (Yuko and Dulce María's friend from graduate school, a Caucasian former college professor who now works as a staunch advocate for people with disabilities) to support us with the technical parts of Zooming our presentation at the Dialogues. And there we were: a transnational, multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural group of professional women who worked closely for many weeks.

Our presentation at the 7th Biennial Dialogues on 24 October 2020 happened at the height of political anxiety in the United States, right before the contentious and much awaited presidential election. During the previous four years, the Trump administration had been engaged in boldfaced attempts to suppress votes, particularly those of Black and Brown people, and like many others, we labored to protect our right to vote. Speaking at the Seneca Falls Dialogues was one of our attempts to make a difference. The theme of the Dialogues, "Questioning the Past, Disrupting the Present, Building the Future," inspired us to lead an exchange of ideas that could foster insights and new determination for working pointedly toward creating a more perfect Union. We aimed to offer our experiences in becoming politically conscious in order to affirm to our audience how and why individual efforts can impact all of us. Yuko wanted to tell the story of how Raichō Hiratsuka and Fusae Ichikawa, Japanese activists in their suffrage and peace movements, helped shape her personal and professional life. Denise wanted to talk about the first wave of Black suffragists, the precursors of today's powerful Black women activists who inspire her. Dulce María wanted to discuss how Latina writers and activists modeled personal political power and activism and helped her to define her hybrid identity as Latina American. This essay is an amplified version of that presentation.

In presenting our stories, we aimed to highlight issues that most women of color address: How do we respond when encountering sexism from "allies" who claim to be committed to social justice? How can we best acknowledge and learn from Black and Brown feminist and suffrage movements? How do we recover the negated and elided stories of Black and Brown women activists? What can each of us do on a daily basis to help enfranchise people of color? What can we do to support contemporary voting rights activists like Aimee Allison (the creator of She the People, a national network that helps to empower women of color and to shape politics), Sayu Bhojwani (the founder of New American Leaders, an organization that trains immigrant women to run for office), and Voto Latino (a non-profit organization co-founded by actor and activist Rosario Dawson) whose purpose is to register voters and to guide them in becoming more politically involved. We hope that this essay fosters deep thinking about how each of us can harness and multiply the power of our life circumstances to engage in activist work for social justice. We want to speak our truths in hope that other people, including young women of color, begin to examine how they can use their own stories and identities to help empower the disenfranchised and impoverished, and thereby to question the past, disrupt the present, and contribute to building a more equitable future.

YUKO'S STORY: JAPANESE SUFFRAGISTS IN THE TIMES OF POLITICAL AGGRESSION

My interest in Japanese suffragists came from my discovery of American suffragists during various visits to the Seneca Falls, New York area beginning in 2014. That year, Denise invited me to join her group trip to

Seneca Falls. Our bus took us—a couple of community people, faculty members, and several students—to Fort Hill Cemetery, the Harriet Tubman House in Auburn, the Women's Rights National Historical Park, the First Presbyterian Church of Seneca Falls, the Elizabeth Cady Stanton House, the 1816 Farmington Quaker Meeting House, the Susan B. Anthony House, Mount Hope Cemetery, and the Office of New Americans in Syracuse. Our trip resulted in a variety of collaborations.

These multiple trips and collaborations led me to question myself: "Why don't I know about Japanese suffragists?" In 1987 I arrived, as a graduate student, at Indiana University in Bloomington. While pursuing my M.A. and then Ph.D. degrees in theatre history, a demanding academic schedule and an English-only climate prompted me to focus on European and American theatre and sociocultural issues, while making myself detached from people and events in the place I was born and raised. But in 2019, while on a trip to Tokyo, I attended a theatre performance of Ai Nagai's play called *We Don't Know Anything*, which is about Japanese women struggling for gender equity. Combined with my experiences at Seneca Falls, this play pushed me to learn about Japanese suffragists. This play, written and directed by Ai Nagai, portrays women, including Raichō Hiratsuka, who founded a group named "Seitō" ("Bluestockings" in translation) and a publication with the same name. As I began to research Japanese suffragists, I realized that I knew more about them than I thought and that I wanted to learn more. The following is a brief historical and personal account of my growing awareness of major Japanese suffragists and their impacts on my developing identity as an activist.

The 1853 arrival in Hiraga of "black ships'" and Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858), an American naval officer and diplomat, resulted in "trading concessions in Japanese ports" that put an end to the trading monopoly held by the Dutch and opened doors to Japan trading with other countries such as Britain and Russia (Craik 25). In this new era called "Meiji," in 1868 Japan began its modernization with its new constitution modeled after Western countries. Western ideas, including enlightenment, evolution, individualism, and liberation, were brought back by Japanese delegates who traveled to Europe and the United States. Japan thrived and built a strong military government. However, this progress also brought decades of Japanese colonialism and imperialism, as is evident in Japan's invasions of other Asian countries from the early twentieth century through 1945. Along with the introduction of progressive ideas to some sections of the population, Japan's patriarchal system (rooted in a strong tradition of Confucianism) continued to control every aspect of citizens' lives. Women were supposed to become "good wives and wise mothers," while men were expected to adopt "western looks, thought, and statesmanship" (Lowy 367). Article 5 of the Police Security Regulations of 1890 prohibited women from organizing political associations, joining a political group, or attending a political meeting (Lowy 367). The Civil Code of 1898 allowed men to treat "married women the same as minors" (Sievers 111). Nonetheless, Japan's "Westernization" (propelled by the import of new information, ideas, and concepts about humans and humanity) influenced many Japanese feminist thinkers and activists.

Early women activists include Suga(ko) Kanno (1881-1911), Toshiko Kishida (1863-1901), and Hideko Fukuda (1865-1927). Suga(ko) Kanno, a vocal women's rights advocate, embraced socialism (and then anarchism). Because of her association with some who plotted the assassination of the Meiji Emperor—the High Treason Incident in 1910—she was tried, sentenced to death, and hanged in 1911. Toshiko Kishida, who began as a lady-in-waiting to Empress Haruko, the consort of Emperor Meiji, became a public speaker who advocated for women's rights in the marriage system and for women's access to education. Hideko Fukuda joined the women's rights movement after hearing Toshiko Kishida in 1882. Hideko Fukuda opened a school for girls and women in 1883. Later she became a contributor to Raichō Hiratsuka's journal titled *Seitō* ("Hideko Fukuda"). Each of them had particular interests but their common focus was on a variety of important issues, including equal rights for men and women, social reformation, women's rights for the sake of "strengthening the nation," "women's need for self-fulfillment" (Molony, "The State and Women" 31). They also advocated for women's demand for freedom from patriarchal restrictions ("Kanno Suga").

Raichō Hiratsuka was the daughter of a high-ranking civil servant; she studied at the Tokyo Women's Higher Normal School and, beginning in 1903, at Japan Women's College. During her years in high school, she became interested in advocating for women's freedom, women's right to achieve higher education, and the equality of men and women. At that time, as she reports, Raichō Hiratsuka became an avid reader of both Japanese and world literature. At Japan Women's College, she learned how to become an independent original thinker, auditing many courses in the humanities, though her major was home economics. After graduating from Japan Women's College, Raichō Hiratsuka continued to study, attending private lessons and classes taught by famous literary scholars and writers.

That experience influenced the nature of the group she and a group of women founded in 1911. Raichō Hiratsuka's group centered their activities on the publication of a feminist journal called *Seitō* (*Bluestocking*), which was named after the mid-eighteenth-century Blue Stockings Society in England. The suggestion for the name came from Chōkō Ikuta, one of the teachers with whom Raichō Hiratsuka continued to study after graduating from Japan Women's College. Raichō Hiratsuka then read an article about Elizabeth Montagu and her friends at their London salon and was impressed with their courage to behave in a novel manner. Raichō Hiratsuka wrote, in her memoir, that "by calling our journal "*Seitō*" ("Bluestocking") "we would be throwing down the gauntlet, so to speak" (Hiratsuka 145). Interestingly, "sei" means blue, but the Chinese character for "tō" does not mean "stockings"; it means "stomping." So, for the Japanese, the name of this group and their journal is "Stomping with blue (stockings)."

Raichō Hiratsuka was influenced by Ellen Key (1849-1926), a Swedish writer and feminist. Key's book, *Love and Marriage*, was translated into Japanese in 1913 (an important event for the transnational spread of ideas); she was intrigued by Key's advocacy for "increased women's educational and career opportunities, political participation, legal status, respect within the family, and freedom of choice" (Lowy 362). She chose a slogan for her group: "In the beginning, woman was the sun," referring to Amaterasu no Omikami, the sun-goddess in Japanese legend. In the first volume of *Seitō*, Raichō Hiratsuka wrote: "When Japan was born, woman was the sun, the true human being. Now she is the moon! She lives in the light of another star. She is the moon, with a pale face like that of a sickly moon" (Reich and Fukuda 287). Raichō Hiratsuka's focus was on the harmony between love and marriage, and on the eradication of societal restrictions on women's roles as wives and mothers. She did not support women's suffrage at the beginning of her career as the leader of the Bluestocking feminist group until later when she understood the basis of human rights and democracy in women's suffrage.

Women activists like Raichō Hiratsuka who sought ways to improve their public and private lives were often called "New Women"; their focuses varied and had no "general agreement on issues, approaches, or tactics" (Lowy 363). Fusae Ichikawa was one of those women. She was born in a farming village in Aichi prefecture and began her career as a schoolteacher and then as a journalist in Nagoya. After moving to Tokyo in 1918, together with Raichō Hiratsuka and Oku Mumeo, Fusae Ichikawa founded the New Woman's Association (Shin Fujin Kyōkai, NWA) (Molony, "From 'Mothers of Humanity'" 11). Their activism grew in this post-World War I period of "the new national leadership" and "greater individual freedom and democracy" with a commoner premier and a party cabinet (Vavich 410). In 1924, Fusae Ichikawa founded the League for Women's Suffrage. An outspoken advocate of gender equality, Fusae Ichikawa asserted the importance of women's political participation. To gain support from her conservative foes, she strategically declared that political participation would enable women to "fulfill their work as women" (Garon 34).

Bills for women's suffrage were passed in the Lower House in 1930 and 1931 but failed to pass in the House of Peers ("Feminism"). Fusae Ichikawa continued to work for what she believed: only women could achieve peace and harmony. In "Women Suffrage and International Peace," published in 1931, she argued that women's participation in politics through voting rights was the key to world peace. Yet at the same time, nearly all leading women's groups rallied behind Japan's growing militarism and aggressive invasion and colonization of neighboring countries—as exemplified in the Imperial Army's occupation of Manchuria in 1931-32 (Garon 37). To support the country's immediate need to win the war, in 1943, Fusae Ichikawa endorsed the nation's fertility campaign and served as a director of the wartime Patriotic Press Association. Her promilitary action would haunt and stigmatize her after the war; in 1947 the Allied Occupation purged Fusae Ichikawa from public life (Ichikawa 60). In 1953 she won a seat representing Tokyo in the upper house of the Diet and she became a leading member of the Diet (Japan's bicameral legislature that consists of the House of Representatives and the House of Councilors). American feminists in the late 1940s called her the "Susan B. Anthony of Japan" (Molony, "From 'Mothers of Humanity'" 1).

In 1946, the year Japanese women gained the right to vote, 39 women were elected to seats in the Diet. As of 2019, of 241 members of the House of Councilors, 50 are women ("Gender Imbalance"). But the number of women in the Diet is not necessarily reflective of real democracy. Having women in the LDP—the conservative party that has formed the Cabinet for over 40 years—has not helped Japan to prioritize peace and protection of the environment. Some noteworthy liberal women politicians who have served in the party include Kiyomi Tsujimoto, the Constitutional Democratic Party's acting secretary-general; Renhō (Renhō Saitō, who uses only her first name), the leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party; and Etsuko Abe, a local environmental activist and politician in Ehime Prefecture.

Researching and writing about Japanese suffragists and contemporary women politicians has prompted me to reflect on their influences in my life as well as my personal connections with the efforts those women made for liberation, social justice, and equal rights. Consequently, I have a more profound understanding of my own activism. For example, in 1986 I joined Peace Boat, a Japanese-based NGO that took Japanese people to other countries in order to expose them to exploited populations. This group was organized by Kiyomi Tsujimoto and attracted many young activists and educators. During Summer 1986, we visited the Philippines, just after the fall of the Marcos regime. In retrospect I realize that I joined Peace Boat as part of my organic growth as an activist. I grew up watching my mother, Sumiko Kurahashi, working as an eco-activist. Along with other women concerned with ecology, my mother has been a participant in the environmental and safe and affordable food movement. The network that my mother developed over 40 years through her affiliation with Consumer Cooperation allowed her family (including me) to meet with activists, among them my mother's good friend, Etsuko Abe. Such clarification of my history has revealed to me not just who past activists were, but also how deeply I have been connected to them before I was born and through the formative years of my youth.

On the Peace Boat, I met and became good friends with Lui (Louise) Itō, a daughter of Noe Itō, a Bluestocking Society founding member. Noe Itō was involved with the socialist movement as well as the feminist movement. The Police murdered her partner, Sakae Ōsugi (1885-1923), one of the leading anarchists, and Noe Itō, just after the historic earthquake in 1923. I remember that in 1987 I visited Lui Itō, then living in Kyushu, Japan. That same year, before my departure for the United States, I shared coffee with Yayori Matsui (1934-2002), the eldest daughter of the pastor of my church in Japan. She was a journalist and activist who reported on racial, ethnic, and sexual oppression in Japan and in the world. She covered topics such as Minamata disease (mercury poisoning), Korean sex workers during World War II, and violence against women (Asia-Japan Women's Resource Center).

At the beginning of my journey, when I first encountered the history of American suffragists and activists in Seneca Falls, I had become distant from the history of my own Japanese activist sisters. My research enforced that yes, they existed, and yes, I did know quite a bit about them. They had always been part of my life, and they helped to shape the activist I am today. This realization, a sort of rediscovery of Japanese suffragists and activists, now leads me to highlight the crossroads I shared with some of these remarkable women, and some of our similarities—an activism that I had learned and exercised prior to my departure to the United States in 1987; that activism was always inside me.

Though I had not realized it until recently, my personal connections and experiences with those courageous and amazing women helped to shape my interests and investment in activism. Today, as I revisit those years and revalue the encounters and discoveries that I had taken for granted, I try to find ways to continue to be an activist by using my research, writing, and by publishing my scholarship. As evident in the periodical *Bluestocking*, writing and publishing have been powerful acts of social activism. And as I have rediscovered, collaborating is another powerful vehicle for activism. Certainly, collaborating with Denise Harrison and Dulce María Gray has confirmed to me that right now, especially, in American society it is imperative for us to highlight diverse suffragists and their movements.

Denise A. Harrison's Story: The Disrupters, The Democratic Activism of Black Suffragists and Foremothers of the Civil Rights Movement

My interest in the women's movement came about while attending my first consciousness-raising meeting. Starting in the 1960s in New York and Chicago, those meetings were a form of activism popularized by feminists. That first meeting made me abundantly aware of the oppressive nature of my marital household and the fact that among my circle of friends, I was the only woman of color. As I gained greater awareness of myself as a Black woman in America, I also realized that my life in the church also propelled me in my journey toward activism. I am a convert to Catholicism. I joined because I was searching for meaning and spiritual fulfillment and for ways to advance Black people. My foremothers had used participation in the church in the same way.

I had come of age at the height of the Liberation Theology movement and had been impacted by a letter titled "What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States" (Howze et al). Supporting the call of Pope John Paul II to use our gifts to serve one another, the bishops' letter charged us to use the gift of Blackness. Thus, I became actively engaged in the social justice arm of the Catholic church: the Catholic Commission. These intersecting factors—rooted in gender, race, and faith—then guided me toward actively seeking the stories of Black women warriors who fought for our civil rights.

I had already read the work of bell hooks, and though I do not agree with everything that she upholds, I was moved and shaped by what she says in her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, regarding how Black women have consistently pushed to move from the margins to the center. I was a young working mother and a student taking Women's Studies courses in the mid-1980s. And that is where I began to deliberately understand Black women's activism. The Women's Suffrage movement, as it was taught to us, highlighted the voices and contributions of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Alice Paul, and the achievement of the 19th amendment. Truth and Tubman, African American women who disrupted the status quo, were recognized and venerated by the National Women's Suffrage movement, as was Frederick Douglass who attended the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York in July of 1848.

However, there were many more African American women disruptors who served in the frontlines and were not included in the retelling of Black women's history. Historically, Black women have had much more at stake than just their gender; race targets them and simultaneously makes them invisible. Long before Kimberlé Crenshaw articulated this dichotomy in her now frequently cited article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," Black activist women understood the theory of intersectionality. That too became an impetus for me to know their stories, especially those that have been elided.

I proceed in this essay by introducing several generations of Black women activists: Ida B. Wells Barnett (1862-1931), a journalist and author of *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States*; Mary Elizabeth Jackson (1867-1923), a YWCA leader and civil servant with the Rhode Island Department of Labor who was appointed "Special Industrial Worker among Colored Women" for the National War Work Council of the YMCA, where she recommended programs to encourage fair employment for women of color; and Nellie Griswold Francis (1884-1969), the founding member of an African American suffrage group that included an anti-lynching campaign. These women are the foremothers of Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Stacey Abrams and Carol Anderson, to name a few. Because they were Black, the women I mentioned above were not in the public eye, but they contributed greatly to the women's movement and Black civil rights.

And there is also Anna Julia Cooper who graces the covers of *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (2 volume set) (Hine). She was an educator who graduated from Oberlin College in 1884. Having majored in Classic Studies (rather than the usual Homemaking), she wrote about what it means to be a Black woman from the south. Hers was one of the first texts written on intersectionality, where she famously said, “Only a Black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me” (Cooper 31). Other Black women activists include Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who participated in the Underground Railroad lecturing circuit, and is chronicled in William Still’s *Underground Railroad: Authentic Narratives and First-hand Accounts*. Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells-Barnett were all recognizable “race” women. They spoke at club events, kept diaries and memoirs, and created literature. Mary Church Terrell (who was born to an educated middle-class family) worked for the women’s vote and was a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She helped to create the National Council of Negro Women, and her motto, “Lifting as we climb,” became the mandate of African Americans as they achieved educational and social economic success (Parker).

The details of the life of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, one of the most familiar names outside of Anthony, Cady-Stanton, Mott, and Truth, are often glossed over. Wells-Barnett led an anti-lynching campaign and Black Women’s club movement that spearheaded activism and disruption across America, especially in the deep south and the northeast. In the preface of Wells-Barnett’s book, *Red Record*, the abolitionist and public statesman, Frederick Douglass, writes about her: “Brave woman! You have done your people and mine a service that can neither be weighed or measured” (7).

When I encountered Nannie Helen Burroughs, I began to understand that even though they were relegated to the shadows of history, there were many Black warriors who worked against, and succeeded, despite all odds and threats. Her parents had been enslaved. Later in life, when she attempted to work as a teacher in Washington, D.C., she faced grave rejection, even from other African Americans, because her skin color was very dark. But she didn’t give up. Instead of working for someone else, she opened a school and proceeded to teach poor Black children. Later, with help from the National Baptist Convention, and with money donated by

Black women and children, she opened the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. She was also active as the secretary of the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention and was steadfast in advocating for poor Black people. She raised large amounts of money from Black churchgoers (not wealthy white donors). Burroughs dedicated all her adult life to educating Black women. People in the Washington, D.C. area knew her, because of her relationship with the Baptist Church and with her mentors and teachers, Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Church Terrel (Jones 211).

Like Burroughs, Jarena Lee was active in the church and the Black community. She is the first African American woman preacher in the African Methodist Church (AME). She believed that God called her to preach and persisted in the face of opposition and rejection by members of her own Black community. The leadership of the Black clergy believed that a woman could not be called to the ministry. Jarena Lee kept preaching even when the church ignored her petitions for acknowledgment. She was not able to be ordained until Richard Allen, the head of the AME church, heard her and finally admitted that she could move her audience, and therefore he granted her a license to preach (Jones 26-27).

I grew up hearing about Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Shirley Chisholm. They inherited the benefits of the foundational work done by the aforementioned Black suffragists and activists. At the 1964 Democratic convention, Hamer captivated American television audiences by describing how the Democratic party, state legislators, and the local police were asking Black women to pay with their bodies for their continued insistence to have the right to vote. That is, Hamer tells us, if she pushed for the right to vote, her Black body would be "ransom" (in other words, that she could be killed). That impacted me and my sense of identity as a young Black woman. Black women's bodies have been held for ransom since being forcefully migrated to the United States and the Caribbean. I was awakened by Hamer, and then by Baker and Chisholm's pushing against the political machine striving to limit their voices. They were collectively questioned for being too Black, too bold, and too loud in their calls for equality, justice, and suffrage. Subsequently, Ella Baker organized young people in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and they started their own organization, the Student Non-violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Chisholm's phrase, "Unbossed and Unbought," became a rallying cry for young women like me long before we knew of the barriers she broke, for example, her brazen idea that she would not seek the approval of her Democratic colleagues in making the decision to run for president of the United States.

Years after Chisholm's run for president, I walked past a poster taped to the side of the custodian's desk in the building in which I had a class. It was a poster of a Gibson Girl with an American flag inviting students to a conversation held by the Honorable Shirley Chisholm. The poster was dirty, with droplets of water and coffee staining it. When I left the college for graduate school, the custodian told me he was retiring. I asked him if I could have the poster. For whatever reason, he said yes, as long as I would make him a copy. Today, as I look at the poster—professionally framed and hanging in my office—I am struck by my lack of knowledge of Chisholm back then. I am also thankful for her work and the foundation that she helped to build for me as a Black woman navigating the 21st century.

Looking at Chisholm's poster brings me to current Black women activists Stacey Abrams, Carol Anderson, and Patty Ferguson-Bohnee. These women have trained a core of organizers to teach communities of color how to prepare for upcoming elections. These are the women who made the way for Vice President Kamala Harris. I see a future "Harris" in the little seven-year-old activist Wynter Amor Rogers, who marched on Long Island shouting "No Justice, No Peace" to protest the deaths of George Floyd of Minneapolis, MN, and Jamel Floyd of Baltimore, Maryland (Brinton). Rogers gives me hope that the next generation of Black women is ready and unafraid to take the reins. These women are the important links that chain me to my history as a Black woman activist, a history that spans over 400 years of known and unknown women. They are the force, the disrupters, who will shatter the status quo.

Dulce María Gray's Story: Encountering Latina Disrupters

I make meaning by writing and reading. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to me that early in my life I would arrive at political consciousness and consequent activism through my encounters with books by Latinas with whom I held affinity. Julia Alvarez, for example, a Dominican American poet, novelist, activist, and philanthropist, writes truths that have shaped my awareness of what it means to straddle Dominican and American cultures (along with the islands of Manhattan and Hispaniola). Her first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, explores the struggles of post-colonial Dominican Republic and of four immigrant sisters in New York who must deal with intersecting issues of gender, ethnicity, race, class, and cultures. It is about the Dominican immigrant experience and the forging of young women's gender and ethnic hybrid identities. Alvarez cloaks that novel (and her other works) boldly in the politics of Latina-Dominican-American ethnic bodies and lays bare the struggles, joys, and cultural and historical specificities that impact us in the process of acculturating. That novel, more than any other, provided me with insights, affirmation, camaraderie, and great motivation to confront what it means to be a hybrid American woman living in a democracy (not the dictatorship into which I was born) and with the right to create and exercise my public voice.

The same thing happened when I first encountered the ideas of Chicana writer and activist Gloria Anzaldúa who, in her book titled *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, famously said, "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (59). I will never forget the time in the mid-1990s that she stood in front of a huge audience and spoke unashamedly about her menses, her own diminutive body, and the backlash she experienced from her own Mexican American community for being gay; in refusing to be silenced, she showed me that indeed the personal is political, that I need to resist destructive gender expectations, and that as a Brown woman in the United States, although I have civil rights, I have to claim them. Her strength in exposing her truths helped to open my eyes to the weight placed on the shoulders of Latinas by traditional gender role expectations. It is from Anzaldúa, particularly from *This Bridge Called My Back*, that I first learned about the many intersectional borderlands that I inhabit.

Likewise, I'll never forget recognizing myself, yet again, while reading Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*, a historical novel about the four Dominican Mirabal sisters. And the lessons weren't just about seeing my cultural legacy in Alvarez's rendition of the sisters, three of whom were murdered at the command of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo because of their activist opposition to his dictatorship. The sisters were subsequently immortalized when the United Nations chose November 25, the day of their deaths, to create the International Day Against Violence Toward Women. That historical novel helped me to name my condition and it taught me lessons about how to be strong, engaged, and when needed, even defiant. That novel taught me about my own Dominican history, a topic that was never included in my United States schooling. I learned about the Dominican genocide of Haitians, the particular brand of Dominican patriarchy, and the opportunistic Dominican suffragist movement (e.g., allowing only certain women the right to vote and then forcing them to "vote" repeatedly for Trujillo) that deeply affected the lives of women during Trujillo's dictatorship (including my own grandmother and mother) and the inheritance that it created for women like me. It was that novel that caused me to research the history of Dominican women's rights back on the island, and to examine the legacy that we carry as immigrants in the United States.

I learned that Dominican women were allowed to vote symbolically in 1934 and 1938 and then constitutionally in 1942, but only white literate "ladies of high social standing" were allowed to vote or to participate in movements and groups (such as Acción Feminista Dominicana and Consejo de Mujeres), and those groups were allowed to exist and support other women only if they upheld laws that focused on "women's issues" such as being a "good Catholic" (like Mary, the mother of Jesus), an "obedient supportive wife," caring for children, and lauding Trujillo. In that dictatorship, my maternal grandmother and mother lived controlled disenfranchised lives. And most women supported that arrangement!

Learning about Trujillo's pseudo support of women's rights (and the consequent legacy of having to be submissive that I inherited) prompted me to unpack the complexity of Dominican women who were oppressed and were complicit in maintaining that oppression: Was complicity an act of survival (and therefore resistance)? Hadn't I, similarly, aligned myself with the United States' ideals of democracy and enfranchisement, even though the United States had invaded the country of my birth, driven me out of my home, language, and culture, allowed me to enter the United States, and then rejected me? A decade and a half after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, with a new label to mark my ethnic identity, having morphed into a "Hispanic" in the Land of the Free, I became a citizen of the United States. As I prepared to exercise the freedom and responsibility denied to my grandmother and mother, and to shed the legacy that threatened to incarcerate me into docility and silence, it became even more important for me to seek works by Latinas.

I intentionally sought the examples of Latina writers who use the power of writing to disrupt the status quo, who model agency and autonomy. Those Latinas include Dulce María Loynaz, a Cuban poet, novelist, attorney, traveler, travel writer, and perceptive woman who spent much of her life in what she called "internal exile" in Cuba. Her contemporary, my maternal grandmother, Auredilia Deschamps, a French immigrant who lived in Cuba before settling in Dominican Republic, thought it fitting that I too should be named Dulce María. Having been born in Dominican Republic and being therefore technically (Latin) "American," it was only after I had become "American" in the United States definition of that word that I read Dulce María Loynaz's novel, *Jardín*. I found it to be a complex but enticing work, which she completed in 1935 shortly after Cuban women obtained the right to vote; it presented me with a strong autonomous modern woman who, through writing and reading, transcends confinement (even if only psychologically and emotionally).

Subsequently, I learned about Jovita Idár, a Mexican American teacher, social justice activist, and journalist who in the early 1900s published articles opposing discrimination against Spanish-speaking people in the United States. She advocated for women's suffrage, women's equal access to education, and fair treatment for Latinas. Today she is recognized as the first to organize a feminist social movement for Latinas. Idár led me to María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, a Mexican American author who wrote in English from the conquered Mexican people's perspective. Her first novel, *The Squatter and the Don: A Novel Descriptive of Contemporary Occurrences in California* (published in 1885) supports women's suffrage and critiques the mistreatment and marginalization of Mexicans after the Mexican-American War.

From the mid-1980s through the 1990s, while the publishing world packaged and marketed what today we recognize as "Latino/a/x literature" (and often referred to the foremothers of Latino/a/x literature [Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, and Cristina Garcia] as the "three amigas"), I read works by Puerto Rican women. They were significant to me partly because their stories too came close to what was familiar to me—to what I was experiencing as a new immigrant. Julia de Burgos' poems (e.g., *Song of the Simple Truth: The Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos*) were captivating because they described the social struggles and oppression of poor Puerto Ricans on the island and in New York, and because Burgos had been the Secretary General of the Daughters of Freedom (the women's branch of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party), and in the Bronx, where I finished growing up, the Puerto Rican independence movement was strong, loud, and visible; it was a movement that included women who were engaged equally.

Poetry, short stories, fiction, and non-fiction by Judith Ortíz Cofer gave me language to articulate my own experiences emigrating to the United States—particularly her novel, *The Line of the Sun*, which traces a Puerto Rican family's move from Puerto Rico to a tenement in New Jersey. I felt drawn to Ortíz Cofer and her work because so much of it is about the power of language and her own life as a hybrid woman—plus, she was an English professor (and I was working diligently to be a professor). Likewise, Esmeralda Santiago's memoirs and novels, especially *When I was Puerto Rican*, and her activist work in founding a shelter for battered women, allowed me to begin envisioning a place for myself in a society where I am derided and called "spic." Seeing Santiago's process of adjusting to a new life provided a "how-to" example for me.

Latina writers' nourishing works became even more urgent to me when, during the assaultive Trump administration, I searched for opportunities to ignite my students' interest in learning about Latinos and in engaging political activism. While enduring rampant voter suppression and tactics that directly affect Latinx people—for example, feeding us relentless misinformation, fear-mongering, threatening those who have undocumented family members, being harassed at voter centers, restricting polling hours so that they conflict with work schedules, underequipping and understaffing voter centers, limiting ballot drop boxes, purging inactive voter registrations, requiring that debts be paid before being allowed to vote, disenfranchising offenders after they've paid their debts to society, and requiring unreasonable name-matching such as having to match hyphens and accents—it was imperative to share my sources of motivation and inspiration, particularly with fellow Latinos. The Latinx population is the largest minority ethnic or racial group in the United States electorate. About 800,000 Latino citizens turn 18 every year. Of the 32 million who are eligible to vote, slightly more than 50% are women (Igielnik and Budiman). They need to be informed, mobilized, and empowered!

And thus, I continue to seek the examples of Latinas like Julia Alvarez who is also an activist and philanthropist. Alvarez works for girls' and women's education. She co-founded Alta Gracia, a farm and literacy center dedicated to promoting environmental sustainability and independent coffee farming in Dominican Republic. Recently, she donated Alta Gracia to The Mariposa DR Foundation, an after-school educational program for girls that creates sustainable solutions to end generational poverty. She also co-founded Border of Lights, an activist digital forum for commemorating the Haitian massacre and for promoting racial equity between Dominicans and Haitians. And she continues to write. Her most recent novel, *Afterlife*, published just before the 2020 election, centers on a woman who, late in her life, confronts three fundamental questions asked by Leo Tolstoy: How can I learn to do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I most need, and to whom should I, therefore, pay more attention? What affairs are the most important and need my focused attention? The answers to those questions are worth discovering because they can lead us to disrupt the present and to build a more perfect Union.

DIALOGUE

Our aim for the presentation and for this narrative has been to tell the stories of the experiences, inspirations, and motivations that propelled us to invest in democratic activism. Our stories are indeed unique, but they all underscore and illuminate some of the intersections that are evident in activist movements and ideologies upheld by women of color in American society. Our stories reveal and underscore that we need to continually reflect on our work, to examine our past and to consider our future, and that we need to interact and collaborate with other women, because it is absolutely true that together we are made stronger. Our stories intersect and illustrate our growing awareness of the power of politics to impact women's lives; the three of us were influenced by women who fought fiercely against the particularities of their political status quo and yet were also complicit—forcibly or voluntarily—in oppressing other women. Their complicity was based not just on differences in political beliefs or the demands of their nations, but also on race, colorism, socioeconomic standing, gender orientation, and or access to and level of attained literacy. Like the women we discuss, the three of us continue to wrestle with understanding what we mean by being complicit in women's oppression. We also continue to resist the constant gender-based expectations, and the double-edged role imposed on us by the religious institutions that shape women to be docile and obedient and at the same time teach them to be care-providers and to work for social justice. All of our stories show women's efforts to resist being infantilized and being treated as if we are mentally deficient. All of our stories show women working deliberately to help move women from the margins to the center.

In telling our stories, we hope to provide examples of how to recognize the work of our foremothers, to transcend our own conditions, and to inspire others. The very act of speaking is activism. Speaking can be enlightening, as evidenced by the conversation that followed our presentation. During the breakout session, Susan Larkin took notes on the questions and comments expressed by participants—students, scholars, and educators—who were all enthusiastic and engaged. When everyone returned to the whole group discussion, we talked about their concerns. One question was about how to address trends such as land acknowledgments which could become, one person said, “routine,” superficial, and disingenuous. How and why, one person asked, can we offer honest and worthy land acknowledgments? Each of us responded: land acknowledgments are part of the call to action recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada; they are inspired by First Peoples reverence and connection to the land; they serve to recognize, commemorate, and honor Indigenous people, their histories and their losses; they are meant to acknowledge the breaking of many treaties over hundreds of years, and to recognize that there are systemic and institutional inequities that continue to affect First Peoples and therefore all peoples. Land acknowledgments recognize the diversity and continued existence of Indigenous people. As we responded, we emphasized that it is an activist act to help everyone to be honest and empathetic—not just for the sake of Indigenous peoples, but for all of us. Land acknowledgments can help start the process of reconciliation.

Another participant wanted to know how she is supposed to “rescue” oppressed women and “why oppressed women in other countries don’t save themselves, for example, by leaving abusive situations.” First, we encouraged everyone to examine the definition of “rescue” and to ask ourselves, “from which position am I ‘rescuing’ anyone?” We pointed out that it is dangerous to assume that women in dire need do nothing for themselves. That assumption in itself is oppression. Our role as activists is not to judge. Second, we reminded participants that resistance comes in multiple forms. For instance, the storytelling and quilting of enslaved Black women is resistance. Remaining alive is resistance. We pointed out that indeed some women don’t have the luxury of leaving an oppressive condition, and thus they resist in other ways, which may, to some people, seem to be acts of complicity.

We clarified that oppressed women and people in the world do leave. For instance, right now, we are experiencing the greatest human displacement since World War II. We mentioned Ai Weiwei’s documentary film, *Human Flow*, where he shows us startling images of the movement of approximately 65 million people roaming the earth in search of a better life. They are spit out of their countries, forcibly displaced, scattered in other lands and languages, and separated from their children and loved ones. They are repeatedly driven out of their homes (and everything that is familiar to them) by intolerance, political instability, violence, poverty, and environmental disasters. And yet, despite rejection, abuse, and death, they continue to leave and to search for safety and freedom. We reminded every one of us that our fundamental role as activists is to be informed, to understand causes, situations, and circumstances, and to be empathic and honest. We emphasized and reiterated that all of us have talents and gifts that can and should be applied to help improve situations, and, most importantly, that we need to speak our truths, to stand side by side with those who need help, and to collaborate in the process of figuring out solutions.

A different participant asked how people with white privilege can truly have conversations "across the aisle." To this we responded that white privilege itself needs to be acknowledged and understood, and that from its inception the United States has been a place where white people benefit from opportunities that are not available to non-whites. People without white privilege need to express their views, their histories, and pain. We reiterated that there has to be respectful listening and acknowledgment based on open minds and hearts. We must remember that silence can easily become many different kinds of violence. We must break the silence and create safe occasions and environments for courageous dialogues. We must tell our stories, particularly those that illustrate instances of privilege and disprivilege. We must take productive action, like voting and helping others to find value in voting. That is a significant way to engage in dialogue across the aisle, and to help eradicate white privilege. Indeed, "vote" was the last word uttered during our dialogue. With that word always in mind, we intend to continue our journeys as disrupters.

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