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Raquel Holguin
CSUSB

Lark Winner
CSUSB

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The Women on the Frontlines of the Revolution

By Raquel Holguin and Lark Winner

The 2016 presidential election brought to the surface how deeply divided the United States is politically and socially. Many issues that seemed mostly settled, such as the right to abortions, gender equality, protected civil rights for the LGBTQ community, and environmental protections, have resurfaced to become front-page, hot button issues that are in danger of being overturned. For many armchair liberals, the Obama years seemed to demarcate an era where an inclusive liberal agenda was taken for granted, and an era where a slow, continual path towards progressive ideals was inevitable—regardless of minor battles or small setbacks. For those on the fringes of radical, left-wing political activism, the previous eight years have been a source of contention, where the surface-level achievements of a moderately progressive administration have drowned out serious issues related to police brutality, rape culture, systemic racism, and a massive military industrial complex that needs continual conflict in order to maintain its profit margins and relevance. The election of Donald J. Trump, in November of 2016, came as a shock to many progressives who felt confident that nothing could get in the way of a continued progressive movement, and many people who had never taken part in any direct activist movement or mobilization felt that it was now necessary to get directly involved in some form of activism.

One of the largest movements to form after election night was the Women’s March on Washington. With a single cohesive focus, accompanied by slick marketing, the Women’s March on Washington was set for January 21st, the day after Donald Trump’s inauguration as the 45th President. With it came a network of sister marches in cities across the United States, and the rest of the world for those who felt solidarity with the movement, but who were unable to travel to Washington for the official event.

The historical fight for gender and sexual equality has been a long and complicated endeavor. It has had many different faces, addressed an array of issues, and moved in waves. This complex approach to obtaining women’s rights is due to the multi-dimensional factors that cause inequity. The women’s rights movement in the United States became prominent at the Seneca
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Falls Convention in New York (1862). The focus of the convention was to address the fact that women did not possess political rights. Women, with the support of a small number of men, advocated for the right to vote, the right to own property, and the right to obtain a college education. This was a precursor to subsequent conventions working towards political parity, which resulted in the long and arduous battle for suffrage.

From 1862 through 1920, women were empowered to challenge the status quo. Many rose to leadership positions, which was very different from their role as a man’s submissive property. Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, and Susan B. Anthony began speaking publicly, organizing within the community, and partaking in political activism. Due to their efforts, the 19th Amendment was finally ratified to provide women the legal right to vote in 1920, almost 60 years after Seneca Falls.

Despite the victory of the Suffrage Movement, many women, especially those of color and of a lower socioeconomic status, continued to lack equitable opportunities. This was due to issues that intersected with gender, such as race, class, and sexuality. Suffrage was just the beginning of the issue of equality. Women continued to face economic discrimination, suppression of their sexual expression, and were limited to rigid gender roles. Therefore, a second wave emerged.

Leaders of the Second Wave of Feminism focused on closing the wage gap, sexual liberation, reproductive freedom, bodily integrity, as well as aligning with the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s through the 1980s. Achievements made during this wave were the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Griswold v. Connecticut, and Roe v. Wade. While these were major advancements, those outside of the heteronormative still faced disparity in access, treatment, and liberties.

The Third Wave of Feminism continued the ideologies of the second wave through the 1990s, but also broadened them to

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2 Ibid.

include genders outside of the binary, transgender individuals, and queer sexuality. By this time, sexism was a well-known issue, and there was legislation passed to prevent institutional forms of it. However, social forms – such as expectations of women to maintain unrealistic beauty standards, fulfill supportive social roles, and be sexually submissive – still existed. In an attempt to combat social sexism, many feminist public figures emerged. Some of those figures were living – Madonna, Queen Latifah, and Mary J. Blige – while others were fictional, like Carrie from Sex and the City and Disney’s Mulan.4 Representation of independent, successful, heroic, and strong women was yet another breakthrough; but like previous movements, once an issue was addressed several more rose to the surface.

The existence of the Fourth Wave is highly debated, but experts legitimize it by pointing out the importance of social media in the fight for women’s equality. The Fourth Wave of Feminism began in the 2000s, and it focused on social justice issues such as spirituality, immigration, and the importance of preserving the natural environment.5 The turning point during this phase in the feminist movement, which is known as the birthplace of the fourth wave, was the utilization of social media to address social injustices. This wave quickly became known as the “call-out generation,” since many leaders used social media to call-out any acts of misogyny, recruit budding feminists, create communities, and organize. This “call-out” generation has come a long way from the founders and other feminist activists, yet they still fight for the same things – equality, rights, and inclusivity.

Throughout every one of these historical movements there were two kinds of people: the participants and the bystanders. Raquel Holguin had always told herself that if she had been alive during the Women’s Suffrage Movement, she would have shown up to the polling place to cast her vote, even if that meant getting arrested. If she had been alive during the Civil Rights Movement, Raquel would have been on the forefront of every protest, even if that meant risking my life. She pledged to never become a

bystander. Though she fantasized about her involvement, she never had to put those fantasies into action until November 8, 2016.

On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump announced that he was seeking the Republican nomination for the 2016 presidential election. At the time, critics did not take Trump’s bid seriously and many shrugged him off believing that this was a publicity stunt to increase his presence in the media. Despite the skepticism, Trump won the Republican nomination by basing his presidential platform on the promise to “Make America Great Again.” Some of the other promises he made in his campaign rhetoric were to harshen immigration policies, impede religious diversity, remove access to affordable birth control, criminalize abortion, repeal the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act, and reduce taxes by defunding social service departments that he deemed unnecessary.

To the surprise of many, assumingly Mr. Trump himself, Donald John Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States. For his supporters, this was a vicarious victory. For others, this was the actualization of an unreal fear. For everyone, this meant inevitable change. After the winner of the election was announced, there was mourning of what would be the end of a progressive era, one that had endowed rights and liberties upon so many. Raquel was not sure exactly what this would mean for her, or what it would mean for her loved ones, but she did know that they would all lose their health care, resources, safety, and autonomy. It felt as though all of the progress that had been made in the last 200 years in women’s rights, and indeed, in human rights, was eviscerated.

The day after the election, Teresa Shook, a retired attorney from Hawaii, used Facebook to create an event for a protest in Washington so that participants could voice their disapproval of the new president, and represent the interests of the different

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communities that believed they would be negatively impacted by a Trump presidency. That night, she had about 40 people who signed on to participate. When she woke up the next morning, the event had more than 10,000 pledged participants. Bob Bland, a fashion designer in New York also began planning a demonstration on the east coast and reached out to Shook upon hearing of hers. The two collaborated via social media and decided to join forces. After receiving criticism for their lack of inclusivity of marginalized groups such as immigrants, people of color, Muslims, and the LGBTQ community, the two organizers recruited three New York based activists to serve as co-chairs of the national march: Tamika Mallory, a gun control advocate; Carmen Perez, head of the Gathering for Justice, a criminal-justice reform group; and Linda Sarsour, who recently led a successful campaign to close New York City public schools on two Muslim holidays.”

In late November, they announced their plans for an inclusive demonstration in Washington.

The Women’s March on Washington was scheduled to occur the day after the inauguration. In the weeks following the announcement of the march, the respondents expected to attend grew from 10,000 to 1.8 million. Cities across the nation were encouraged by the march organizers to host local demonstrations of their own to provide those who could not travel to Washington with a space to protest. Countries around the world, including Mexico, London, Australia, and Canada, also planned demonstrations to stand in solidarity with Americans.

The mission and vision of the march was to stand together, “recognizing that defending the most marginalized among us is defending all of us.” The intentions of the march were not to change the outcome of the 2016 elections, but to unite many marginalized groups who were going to face oppression should the

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new administration follow through on their campaign rhetoric.\textsuperscript{11} The leaders of the Women’s March on Washington realized that many groups were going to be targeted for different reasons. They wanted to provide a space for each one of these groups to fight for their rights, but also bring them together to be a part of a collective because they saw strength in unity.

The uniting of these diverse groups is the beginning of the Fifth Wave Movement. In the past, various movements gathered people to unite against an issue in hopes to gain access or freedom. Today, the current threat is the elimination of rights and liberties that are already in existence. This is completely different than anything that has ever happened in American history and is an affront to the long history of the women’s rights movement. This is why communities have set aside personal grievances and stepped forward to join in an alliance.

Many groups, including a group of CSUSB student marchers, came together to represent their communities at the local branches of the Women’s March. Like those groups, the CSUSB students prepared for the Los Angeles march by creating signs. As the organizer of the CSUSB marchers, Raquel’s sign said, “I march for the women and people I love who don’t understand why we march.” This was very personal for her because many of her close friends and family members opposed Raquel’s decision to attend. Despite their disapproval, she went to the march and did so because she wanted to fight for her rights as well as theirs.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} Raquel Holguin organized the CSUSB student marchers and participated in the Los Angeles Women’s March. Her experiences and thoughts are included in this paragraph.
January 21, 2017 – the day of the Women’s March on Washington. Turnouts across the globe were unprecedented and spanned every continent. The official event in Washington eclipsed the turnout for the inauguration the day before by three-fold, with estimates of over 470,000 people attending the March in Washington.\textsuperscript{13} The difference in crowd size between the two events also sparked the first major issue of the new presidency, with a war erupting between the White House and the media over the reporting of crowd sizes. The major metropolitan cities that had sister marches saw hundreds of thousands of marchers swarm their downtown areas. Final tallies showed that approximately one percent of the US population took to the streets on January 21st.\textsuperscript{14}


Many had doubts as to how “peaceful” this protest would be. What if the march turns violent? What if people are arrested? What if CSUSB students are lost? The train pulled into the station, and there were men, women, and even children standing outside of the boarding gates. Some had signs, pink hats, and others were wearing feminist t-shirts. Despite some initial fears and doubts, everyone at the train station was in good spirits.

There was solidarity amongst the group of CSUSB marchers, and we had not yet even boarded the train. When the train finally did arrive, everyone cheered and high-fived each other as they boarded. At each boarding stop afterward, there were crowds of people anxiously waiting. By the fourth stop, the conductor began refusing to let any other passengers onboard. Every stop afterward he made an announcement, “this train is at capacity and we cannot allow any more people on. The next train will arrive in an hour.” During the ride, Raquel observed those on the train, and she felt positive energy, excitement, and hope. As the train pulled into the station everyone clapped and cheered while they exited the train cars. Raquel had never taken the train without a guide, so she was nervous about leading the students to the march headquarters. Though she did not worry long because there was a sea of people with signs, shirts, and pink hats all heading in the same direction. There were so many people walking in the streets that it seemed as though the march had already begun.

As Raquel led the CSUSB students to the march, following the sea of people, she witnessed many personal and thought-provoking signs. One of which was held by a woman and her two children. Her sign said, “I march now so that my kids won’t have to later.” Raquel asked her what her sign meant, and she responded, “Exactly what it says. My ancestors didn’t fight for our rights just to have them taken away.” As fourth and fifth wave feminists, we benefitted from the progress that the feminist leaders before us died to make. Raquel knew that she personally took advantage of these rights, and it is a scary thought that now we are the only thing standing between their existence and their extinction.
Moreover, a 15-year-old girl was holding another sign that said, “I will be of voting age for the next election. My generation is watching.” Raquel asked the girl what her sign meant and her response was, “I want him [President Trump] to know that we, even me who is only 15, are going to keep him accountable for his actions. I hope that he is a good leader and only does good things, but if not, I will be at the next election to make sure he doesn’t win again.” She was not the only underage person in attendance. Raquel saw many under the age of 12, holding signs while chanting with their fists in the air. This political awakening in young people has not happened since the 2008 elections. Youth engagement is important whether it be formally or informally because their needs and issues are likely to go unaddressed due to

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the disparity in representation of those under 35 in leadership positions.\textsuperscript{16}


As we got closer to Pershing Square, the streets became more and more congested with people of diversity. There were cisgender men and women.\textsuperscript{17} There were transgender men and

\begin{itemize}
\item $\text{ cisgender, as defined by Merriam-Webster: }$ of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cisgender. In other words, the term \textit{cisgender} refers to individuals who feel that the gender they were born as properly reflects who they are.
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{17} Cisgender, as defined by Merriam-Webster: of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cisgender. In other words, the term \textit{cisgender} refers to individuals who feel that the gender they were born as properly reflects who they are.
women. There were black men and women. There were white women and men. There were Native Americans, Asians, and Hispanics. There were heterosexuals and homosexuals. Muslims, Christians, Catholics, Atheists, and Agnostics. I had never seen nor experienced so much diversity, and yet so much unity at the same time.

The streets were so inundated that people spilled out more than halfway into the march route. Initially, those on the outskirts were unsure of where to walk or if they should even begin walking. After instructions from those closest to the stage, the march moved forward. As we marched forward, chanting and clapping began, someone in the distance started hollering, “Whose streets?” The people surrounding me shouted back, “Our streets!” This chant was symbolic of the protestors’ refusal to allow any actions of the newly elected administration to cause them to waver in their resistance.

A number of celebrities such as Demi Lovato, Jane Fonda, Ariana Grande, Natalie Portman, Jamie Lee Curtis, Laverne Cox, Kerry Washington and Christine Lahti were also demonstrators at the march. There were so many people in the crowds that it is doubtful that any one person would have noticed brushing passed any of these well-known celebrities. Kerry Washington and Christine Lahti were speakers who reminded the crowds that unity and solidarity is not enough, but continued support and action throughout the next four years will keep the feminist movement strong. A large number of those who attended were first-time protestors who were completely new to the feminist movement. These celebrities used their influence to encourage them to continue to show up and stand up.

The Women’s March has not been without its critics, who have accused it of not addressing the issues facing women from marginalized groups. One of these complaints stems from the Pussyhat Project, which brought knitters across the country

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18 Transgender as defined by Merriam-Webster: (adj.) of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transgender. People who identify as transgender feel that their birth-assigned gender, and who they are, do not align. One of the key distinctions that should be emphasized though, is that gender identity is not related to sexuality.

together through the creation of pink “pussy cat” hats for marchers to wear at the events on January 21st. The hats were intended as tool for solidarity between people who were marching in support of women’s rights and those who could not attend but were able to make hats for those that could. According to the Pussyhat Project’s website, they chose the name because they wanted “to reclaim the term as a means of empowerment.”

While these intentions seem benign, they have come up against resistance from the transgender community. One of the key tenets that differentiates this current generation’s feminism from previous iterations has been the focus on intersectionality. For transwomen this has meant a feminism that acknowledges that anatomy and genitalia are not gatekeepers to gender identity. In an opinion piece in the feminist magazine, *Bitch Media*, Holly Derr emphasizes that “while the March claims intersectionality as central to its platform, and the Pussyhat Project claims to be speaking for both cis- and trans-gender individuals, the latter’s conception of what it means to be a woman is remarkably narrow.” When activists seek to use visual symbolism and plays on language, like the Pussyhat Project, it is necessary to analyze how that language helps perpetuate gender gatekeeping narratives and to understand that those in marginalized communities – like transgender women, and especially transgender women of color – face real, life-threatening violence at rates that cisgender women do not. As Juniperangelica Xiomara explains in her piece on why she chose not to participate in the Women’s March, in order for a movement to claim intersectionality, it has to be based in critical thought, and that it “must center the existences of marginalized people, not just their select body parts.”

Another issue many women had with the march was the fact that, for activists who had already been deeply involved in social justice movements, the sudden “awakening” of moderate progressives to social action comes as too little, too late. For black and brown women, who have been the victims of systemic racism

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in this country at the hands of both white men and white women, there are questions about why they should have to share space with white women who haven’t sought to share space with them in movements like Black Lives Matter. In a piece in Colorlines, Jamilah Lemieux discusses how in the initial planning of the event it was being referred to as a “Million Woman March,” and how “the labors of Black folks (in this case, the 1995 Million Man March and the 1997 Million Woman March, organized by Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam) were being co-opted and erased by clueless White ones.”

The Million Woman March that took place in Philadelphia in 1997 had 750,000 African-American women attend, and the grassroots efforts to bring it to fruition did not have the luxury of the internet and social media to help spread the word.

As activist and grassroots organizer Brittany T. Oliver discussed on her blog, when the organizers of the 2017 March were made aware of the fact there had already been a Million Woman March, organized by black women twenty years earlier, they “decided to change the name to ‘March on Washington.’

Well, this was another Black-led march that advocated for civil rights and culminated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech in 1963.”

The inability for the planners of the 2017 March to accept and acknowledge that black women and men that came before them had helped lay the groundwork for their current movement caused friction amongst some of the planners, and led to resignations by at least two planners.

Reproductive rights were at the forefront of the Women’s March’s agenda, with chants of “Her Body, Her Choice” and signs reaffirming a woman’s right to choose were pervasive throughout the marches across the country. At the center of this issue is the fear that the political swing to the right in U.S. politics will lead to

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26 Ibid.
the loss of abortion access for women and the defunding of Planned Parenthood by means of federal Medicaid reimbursements for preventative care. Planned Parenthood was accused in 2015, by the Center for Medical Progress, a pro-life group, of selling fetal tissue, which invigorated the fight against Planned Parenthood by legislators seeking to challenge Planned Parenthood’s presence in their states. In 2016, “more than 60 new restrictions on access to abortion were passed by 19 states,” with one of the most stringent coming out of Indiana and signed by the then-Governor Mike Pence, now the Vice President. The Indiana bill would require women to pay for funeral expenses for their aborted fetuses and ban women from getting abortions if they knew there was a genetic anomaly in the fetus. Pence’s new position as the Vice President has alarmed pro-choice activists who are afraid of him bringing this agenda to the White House.

For other activists, the focus on abortion access as a benchmark for reproductive rights is too single-issue focused. The battle for reproductive rights and women's bodily autonomy goes much farther than abortion access, even if that issue is still important. For women of color and women that live in poverty, the battle for reproductive rights has also included the fight against forced sterilization and has expanded the boundaries of reproductive rights to include issues of racism, classism, and anti-war ideas. “Women of color challenged the white middle-class feminist movement to recognize that the abortion rights movement needed to encompass ‘bread and butter’ issues such as health care for the poor, child-care, and welfare rights in addition to anti-sterilization abuse efforts.” The 1960s and ‘70s saw Black women caught between the Women’s Liberation movement that vocally fought for abortion rights and men of the Black Nationalist movement that equated birth control and abortion by black women as genocide. A holistic approach to women’s reproductive rights

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is still an issue many feminists see as missing from the current political agenda that is zeroed in abortion access as the central focus. Reproductive rights for these activists embrace intersectionality and address the wider social world that children are raised in – including safe neighborhoods, quality schools, and access to health care – as being reproductive rights that women still do not have.

At the end of the demonstration, organizers announced that over 350,000 people were marching in Los Angeles alone. A political science professor, Jeremy Pressman, from the University of Connecticut compiled a spreadsheet, which tracked the number of protestors across the world. Based off of the information he gathered from local and state police officials he estimates that over 4 million people participated in the marches across the country making it the biggest protest in American history.31 This march is unique and monumental for a number of reasons. The first reason being that diversity did not divide and segregate those present, but rather, it unified them. The second reason is that it sparked the beginning of the Fifth Wave of the Feminist Movement. This represents how far women have come since the beginning and how they refuse to go back to that time. The third reason is that this is no longer solely an American issue, but a global issue. That day, Americans found many allies in countries across the world. The fourth reason is that clearly gender equality is not a reality, even in the twenty-first century. Through the Trump Administration, we can also see that many in power today still perceive a threat if gender equality were to happen. What many who oppose feminism do not know is that equal rights for all does not result in a loss of power for them. Until they are able to recognize this, there will still be a need for the women of the revolution. As history has shown, women will continue to show up to the frontlines regardless of the odds, the adversary, or the risks.

What these issues highlight is how much work is left to be done in addressing the history of social justice movements in the current context of movements that claim intersectionality, but lack the self-critical analysis necessary to create real intersectionality. Reinforcing binary- and anatomy-focused gender narratives, and denying the historical realities of black and brown activism, only

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causes further divisions between groups who ostensibly have similar goals. While the Women’s March on Washington – and its sister marches across the country – were successful in bringing large numbers of people out to demonstrate who had not been involved in social justice before, it does not mean that it is immune from the same critiques it attempted to levy against the current political establishment.

The Women’s March awakened complacent and jaded feminist leaders. It also drew new and inexperienced faces to the movement. Though this gathering of diverse groups was revolutionary, it will not end attacks on marginalized groups. The organizers of the Women’s March are well aware of this and have since vowed to continue to take stands against the 45th president by organizing 10 resistance events that will take place throughout the first 100 days of his presidency. The Women’s March and the subsequent events will not change the outcome of the election, but it may slow down any oppressive legislation the current administration may enact. It will also keep the diverse groups united, with the most oppressed at the very center of the movement.

Bibliography


Author Bios

Raquel Holguin (left) is currently working on her Master’s in Social Work at CSUSB, where she recently received her Bachelor’s in Psychology. She is an outspoken, feminist activist who is passionate about issues such as gender inequality, interpersonal violence, LGBTQ rights, and racial disparities. She spreads awareness about these issues on the CSUSB campus through her involvement in the Violence Prevention Educators group known as VOICE. She is also active in the community and is employed by the local rape crisis center as a SART Coordinator. Upon graduation, Raquel plans to work as a social worker before pursuing a doctorate in public policy. She hopes to then spend the rest of her career working in public policy reformation.

Lark Winner (right) is a senior at CSUSB. She is majoring in history with a focus in European history, minoring in French and gender and sexuality studies, and working towards a certificate in museum studies. She will be graduating in the spring of 2018. Currently, Lark is an intern for the Anthropology museum on campus with the upcoming InDignity exhibition.
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