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We Marched. Now What?!: Positionality, Persistence, and Power as Catalysts for Change

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

WE MARCHED. NOW WHAT?!: POSITIONALITY, PERSISTENCE, AND POWER AS CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

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Can we agree that it's already been a tough couple of years? For many folks, those already pushed to the margins in tangible, daily ways, it was already bad before November 2016. For all of us, I think, it feels even scarier today. The twenty-four-hour news cycle is playing like a movie reel on the inside of my eyelids at work and at home. A 24-hour Twitter and Facebook feed, scrolling-scrolling-scrolling-scrolling-scrolling past mounting trauma—trauma as a result of this administration and trauma amplified and retriggered within our communities and movements. When you work in social justice or justice-adjacent fields, you can't turn it off. When you're a queer woman of color, you can't turn it off. There is no safe space. There are safer spaces like this space we've created together here, but for people with multiple marginalized identities, even safer spaces are riddled with microaggressions and hypervisibility and respectability performance.

That's why, when the first Women's March happened in January 2017, I was intentionally on the sidelines. I chose that position. It's also because I had an infant at home. I have done that grueling bus trip to D.C. many times, and I didn't have it in me. Even at the sister march in Rochester, I took on the role of protest monitor and legal observer. It felt better to be somewhat on the outside because, as much as I was inspired by the organizers of the Women's March and the platform they had put together and the deeply collaborative process they went

¹ These remarks were delivered on October 20, 2018, at the Seneca Falls Dialogues Bi-annual Conference, Seneca Falls, New York.

through to get there, I didn't feel confident that everyone organizing and attending around the nation was truly understanding the intersectional lens at the core of the March, or truly intentionally thinking about their individual place in it. Here's the part where I get really frank. I'm talking about white women.

Even here at this intersectionality-themed dinner, this beautiful and open space, I feel myself naturally hesitate to say those words because I see a lot of white women in front of me, and whether it's rational or not, I'm still fearful that my words will cut you and you'll stop listening to me, that you will react with defensiveness and anger, that you will mark me as negative or naïve. For me, an Asian woman, I worry about being silenced or discredited. For Black women, the ramifications of speaking truth can be even more dire and dangerous. For trans women and trans women of color, especially, there's a fear that speaking up at all will result in banishment from a sisterhood that they're fighting to even be allowed to claim. No one is actively "micro-aggressing" me right now, but in a room where I'm in the literal minority in several ways, I carry with me—I feel the impact of a history of microaggressions, gaslighting, and respectability politics without any person even saying a word to me.

Positionality is an epistemological tool of feminist standpoint theory. The basic premise is that each person enters research work with their own individually shaped experiences — both cultural and personal — and specific social, political, and cultural identities. This is your standpoint, your sense of your positionality in the work. In this way, standpoints are multifaceted and multidimensional rather than essentializing. I'll say that again. Standpoints are multifaceted and multidimensional rather than essentializing. In other words, two people may share some common identities around gender, race, or class or even all three, but none could be defined solely by these attributes, and each has an individual standpoint unique from each other. Positionality is the unpacking-of and declaring-of and sometimes deconstruction of those identities we each hold.

In the context of research, it is making explicit that each researcher has implicit biases. In the context of academia and in the realm of activism, positionality is in direct conversation with intersectionality. If you've taken Dr. Barbara LeSavoy's Feminist Research Methods class at SUNY Brockport, you're familiar with Sandra Harding, American postcolonial theorist and philosopher and editor of the 2004 *Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. Harding developed

the concept of strong objectivity, the idea that starting research from the lives of real women and taking into account the positionality you bring to your research makes for stronger scientific objectivity than weak objectivity or what we'd typically call neutral objectivity. The issue, Harding suggests, is that weak or neutral objectivity is impossible. Every researcher brings their own biases and when we pretend that objectivity is neutral, we tend to privilege the voices of those who are already most likely to be trusted and supported in research, namely white, cisgender, heterosexual, currently abled, college educated men (127). Think back to your social sciences curriculum in high school or college. Whose so-called neutral scientific observations did you learn about?

In an activist context, we talk about the similar concept of checking our privilege and unpacking our privilege, the term "unpacking" made famous by Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* published in 1989 in the Philly-based Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's magazine. It's since been used in trainings all over the world.

I want to note that I just named two white women, Sandra Harding and Peggy McIntosh. They've both achieved some success based on their work and their personal commitment to anti-racist frameworks and culture-shifting work inside and outside of institutions. All that said, it was Black women and women of color who brought these ideas to the front first, all the way back to the African-American suffragettes, the freedom fighters who would not and could not disentangle their race from suffrage rights, who were ultimately disenfranchised as many white suffragettes moved to court southern women after the passage of the 15th Amendment. They did this by insinuating that the best way to counter Black male votes was with women's votes—white women's votes.

For hundreds of years, Black women and women of color have spoken from their standpoint and developed their own theories and activist practices from womanism to the Combahee River Collective to the intersectional theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw. If there's one thing I've learned from actively living "on the margins," in the liminal space, it's that many things are "both, and." We live in a "both, and" world more than a binary world. Women have been marginalized by U.S. history that centers men and their accomplishments. Black women have been marginalized in women's history that centers white narratives. Queer and transgender Black folks have been marginalized in Black women's history. It's all true.

Last night, Tokeya Graham, Reenah Golden, Selena Fleming, and Lu Highsmith of *We All Write* opened the Dialogues with a spoken word event. At one point towards the beginning, they asked us to gather in the Wesleyan Chapel, a room where the Declaration of Sentiments was signed and where Black women who were active and organized in abolition and suffrage movements were made invisible, to speak the names of Black freedom fighters. It felt like a blessing, a reconciling of sorts, to speak the name of Anna Julia Cooper, who wrote the first book analyzing the condition of blacks and women from a feminist perspective, *A Voice from the South* in 1892 (Gines); of Mary Church Terrell, the founding president of the National Association of Colored Women in 1895, an organization that fought for women's suffrage, temperance, access to education, and also against lynching, Jim Crowism, and the sexual assault of African-American women (Michals; Knupfer); of Margaret Murray Washington, Ida Wells Barnett, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Josephine Silone Yates, just a few of many women who worked tirelessly, but did not get more than a footnote (if that) in history and who called for the lifting of women's rights and Black rights in the same voice. It felt like a healing to honor the powerful work done in the Wesleyan Chapel by the attendees of the Seneca Falls Convention, while also declaring suffrage for Black women who fought alongside despite being discriminated against in the early women's movement. It felt like a reclamation. It felt like taking power back. It can be both, and.

Positionality is the key to unlocking our power, both the power to do good and the power to do harm. I recently published my first book, *Girls Resist!: A Guide to Activism, Leadership, and Starting a Revolution*. It's a handbook for young adult readers on how to "do" activism and organizing with a feminist lens. I've been doing workshops about the book around the country. One of the hallmarks of that workshop is an activity that's written into the first chapter of the book, an exercise called "Who Has Power?" (19). The idea for this activity came from a workshop I put together for Girls Rock! Rochester several years ago. I was tasked with doing an organizing workshop for young kids and teens, ages eight through sixteen. I wanted to do it justice, but I was also like, "How do I teach these topics in an age-appropriate way to little kids in a way that's really meaningful?" I consulted with my mom, who is a retired first grade teacher, who suggested something tactile and visual, and ultimately came up with this activity.

In the book version, there's a pretty, full-page illustration that's a picture of a bunch of people all in a grid, kind of like that *Guess Who?* game. Remember that game? Like *Guess Who?*, the picture is just of people's heads. There's a white man in a suit, a brown-skinned women in a suit, a woman wearing hijab and perfect cat-eye eyeliner, a person wearing an androgynous shirt with short hair and lipstick, a Black baby girl, a woman in construction gear, a Black man in a suit, an older Black woman, and a young white boy. I present these pictures to look at and the following prompt without any additional context, "Looking at these pictures, decide who has the most power and who has the least power."

Much like *Guess Who?*, (which eventually came under fire for its lack of diversity in race and gender of the available characters—it's since been updated) (Alexander), playing this game reveals implicit biases we all have. Almost every single camper picked the same people. The middle-aged white man in the suit has the most power. The Black baby girl has the least power. Remember these are kids as young as eight years old. We then use this activity to discuss institutional, systemic power. Who has the power? Who is without power? How do you know this? What did you think about when deciding who has power? We talk about discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, immigration status, skin color, age, ability, gender expression, and more. We unpack implicit bias, the hard-to-unlearn biases we all carry based on what we've been taught and exposed to that inform our unconscious decisions every day.

What amazes me about doing this program with youth is that they get it. The very first time I did this activity, at the first-ever Girls Rock! Rochester camp in 2012, I used a crude Google image search and printed off about twenty images of visually different types of people and asked the girls to put them into order from least to most power. Similarly, the white man in the suit came out at the top (surprise, surprise) and the Black baby came out at the bottom. Honestly, I was kind of flying by the seat of my pants facilitating this activity the first time. One very young girl, maybe 9-years-old, spoke up and said something that changed my own understanding of power and how to teach others about power. She said, "Miss, the baby has the least power, but if the baby cries, a grown-up has to come and pick it up." If the baby cries, a grown-up has to come and pick it up. Mind. Blown. I tell this story now whenever I facilitate the workshop and then I lead into a whole thing about grassroots organizing and how that's what it's all

about—banding our collective voices together, combining our cries together until those with the most institutional power have to listen to us.

From the mouths of babes, quite literally, folx! I've been thinking lately about how women and femmes are infantilized by those with power, how we're treated like children or nuisances even though those *in* power are the most fragile and whiny and self-absorbed. I'd like to propose that we start organizing "cry-ins" where we go to our legislators' offices or homes or, I dunno, the White House, and just cry and cry and cry, unapologetically ugly beautiful crying until we flood the patriarchy with our tears. Persistence crying. Resistance crying.

After watching Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony, I really felt like a cry-in could be a real thing, like we might just flood the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court with our collective tears. And through my own tears, I also reflected on how intersectionality comes into play in our movement. In other words, if we're gonna' cry for Dr. Ford, we've gotta also pay back those tears that Dr. Anita Hill did not hear when she sat before Congress in 1991. Look, we didn't have Twitter and livestreams and whatnot, I get it. But the fact remains that she sat alone and everyone who did cry tears for her sat alone, too. Both, and. I've been seeing this graphic going around with Dr. Ford at the center, facing forward and Dr. Hill slightly behind her, facing sideways so we see her in profile (image by Animashaun and Reynolds).

I've been wondering, who made this? What is the standpoint of the person who made this? Was it a white woman? Why couldn't this image just as well have had them standing side-to-side or back-to-back, equals, or with Anita in front, since she was the trailblazer. Positionality matters, both in understanding the ways we are marginalized and the ways we can become the oppressor, even with the best intentions.

Understanding power, both how institutional power works and how it situates us individually in our movements, is essential to understanding how we build power to challenge inequity. We are going through a transformation as a country right now or, rather, those who haven't felt so closely under attack are suddenly feeling attacked. Quite frankly, the days after the November 2016 election were heavy for me. As they were for many. For some of my friends, though, particularly Black and trans friends, it was just another crappy day in a country that refuses them healthcare, employment, housing, and dignity every damn day. I think that, because those of us who have a lot of systemic advantages,

like myself, were suddenly threatened in a very personal way by this sexist, racist, rapist administration, we woke up.

No social scientist has backed me up on this, but I'm going to declare right here that I believe radical empathy is happening right now. For the first time, seriously powerful white men are being held accountable for sexual harassment and sexual assault, because other white men are finally believing white women. It's not every man, but it's a start and it's about time. That said, even with the #MeToo movement, there have been missteps. October 15th was the one-year anniversary of #MeToo going fully viral thanks to a tweet by actress Alyssa Milano. The actual founder of the #MeToo campaign twenty years ago, Tarana Burke, tweeted on October 15th:

A year ago today I thought my world was falling apart. I woke up to find out that the hashtag #metoo [sic] had gone viral and I didn't see any of the work I laid out over the previous decade attached to it. I thought for sure I would be erased from a thing I worked so hard to build.

I remember calling my friends frantic and trying to figure out what to do. I didn't know whether to go online and say - THIS ALREADY EXISTS! Or to just let it go, but then I realized letting it go wasn't an option in this moment.

Enter - the Sisters. Black women who knew my work and supported me over the years raised up in arms... They activated a network and the support came from everywhere.

I didn't know that @Alyssa_Milano sent out the first tweet until the following day. And that is when she found out about @MeTooMVM and reached out to me. She tweeted an apology and posted our website and asked how she could amplify our work.

The most interesting thing happened over the next 24 hours. I posted a video of me giving a speech about #metoo [sic] from 2014 and that went viral. And then people began to get confused - had "white hollywood" tried to steal this from a Black woman?!?

The short answer, No. But I was definitely in danger of being erased if YOU ALL Black women and our allies and friends, didn't speak up. But something else happened too. I watched for hours that first day as more and more stories poured out across social media from survivors.

One story in particular hit me hard. It was a woman's story or (sic) being assaulted on her college campus and it resonated so deeply with me. I was on the one hand fielding calls from my girls like "whatchu wanna do??" they were ready for a fight to make sure I wasn't erased.

On the other hand - I was watching thousands of survivors pour their hearts out across social media with no container to process, no support and no one really helping to walk them through disclosure or uplift the power of community for survivors.

My work has always centered Black and Brown women and girls. And it always will - but at the heart of it all it supports ALL survivors of sexual violence. And I committed to that work a long time ago so watching people open up with what felt like no covering online was hard.

The whole time I was fretting about saving my work and I didn't realize that 'my work' was happening right in front of me.

I have wondered a lot this year why God chose to give me this platform and why I was trusted to shoulder this responsibility and every time I ask the question the answer shows up in a different way. I am not questioning anymore I am just grateful.

Thank you to everyone who has shown me so much love and support this year. I hope that I represent and stand for survivors of sexual violence in a way that makes you proud. Please know that our work is never ending. In fact its (sic) just beginning (@TaranaBurke).

Our work is never ending as activists and especially as feminists who are living in a critical moment. Now is the time to speak boldly from our standpoint and to use our understanding of our positionality to amplify the voices of those whose standpoint is more directly impacted than ours. The Women's March, for me, was about people banding together and seeing the humanity in each other. It was also an act of radical empathy and an affirmation that our struggles are tied together. As Audre Lorde said, "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own" (132). It was also an opportunity to perform intersectional feminist ally-ship without taking any real risks in doing so for many white women. It was both, and, and all of those truths have meaning.

As an activist, I'm about to say something sort of controversial about protest marches. They don't work. By that I mean they don't work to make change directly.

My first march was a Take Back the Night march, a march in solidarity with the national movement to end violence against women, at SUNY Oswego in 2000. I was an undergraduate. Full disclosure, I went for extra credit. That march was maybe two hundred people and confined to our campus sidewalks near the residence halls. It didn't change rape culture profoundly. I doubt it even changed

the minds of fellow students who were likely going to commit sexual assault that very same weekend who may have heard us through their dorm window or came across our posters on the bulletin boards. It didn't change the campus administration's treatment of sexual assault cases through judicial affairs.

What it did was build power, *in* me. I joined the Women's Center. A year later, I became the director of the Women's Center. I changed my second major to Women's Studies. I went to more marches. I became a community organizer. I chose a career in advocacy and organizing. I wrote *Girls Resist*. I went on a whole different life path because of that Take Back the Night march. I met people through that path who changed my whole life and woke up my sense of justice, the one that was already there ready to rebel.

The Women's March itself is a symbol. It's what your position in relation to activism is in this moment. It's a symbol of the need for feminist intersectionality right now and the power of strong objectivity that you possess right now to change...everything.

We're going to do the uncomfortable work. That's what real persistence looks like. It's not marching over and over again, though we should do that too. It's about persisting through the discomfort of not knowing, or messing up, or harming and not letting ourselves get lost in our own guilt or defensiveness. It's about using our positionality to speak our truth and to honor the truths of others by amplifying voices of those who are pushed to the margins when we're not. It's about living into an idea that we can contain multitudes, that our movements can contain multitudes, that things can be "both, and" and that there isn't one right way to do this work.

We can use our persistence and our power to open doors for others, without speaking for them or without them, without taking credit when we help. We won't abuse our power by assuming we know what those we stand in solidarity with need or want. We can use our power to respond to the needs identified by those affected and marginalized. We can give money directly to people who are impacted, without making judgments about their lives. We can remember our power when making hiring decisions, when making leadership decisions, when we have a seat at a table and others don't, when we have the opportunity to give someone else a platform offered to us first. We need to listen before we act and act in ways that put ourselves on the line. We need to do the risky work of being vulnerable and being *wrong* sometimes.

This is the catalyst. It's you. It's been in you the whole time. The power to harm. The power to help. The power to speak and say the things that feel scary to say. The power to listen and hear the things that feel scary to hear. The power to reclaim our histories and build better, more inclusive ones together. The power to do better and demand better. You are the catalyst. It's been you the whole time.

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