

# Reflections on the Women's March

A Place at the Table

Alexandra Hidalgo



## Abstract

This essay marks one year since hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to protest the election of Donald Trump. Those of us who attended the protests were, in a way, objecting to an imagined future in which our president was elected after running a campaign that foregrounded sexist, racist, homophobic, and ableist views. That future is now our present. Although I cannot know what was going on in the millions of minds present at the protests around the world that day, I can say that many, like myself, could not have predicted how unsettling and surreal the first 12 months of his presidency would be.

Video is available here:

<http://publications.publicphilosophyjournal.org/recvideotext/?issue=76-2BF-0&kid=76-2BC-A8>

Transcript of the video available here:

<http://publicphilosophyjournal.org/full-record/?amplificationid=653>

There is no way to address the many events that have transpired since The Women's March in this short introduction, but President Trump has not deviated from the views he expressed during his candidacy. He pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement and passed a much-contested travel ban on citizens from six Muslim-majority countries and from North Korea and Venezuela.<sup>1</sup> He has unsuccessfully tried to repeal the Affordable Care Act and passed a tax bill that lowers the corporate tax rate from 35% to 21%, which is projected to increase the national debt by more than one trillion dollars over the next ten years.<sup>2</sup> He has also turned his Twitter feed into an uncanny spectacle, threatening to "totally destroy" North Korea, retweeting anti-Muslim content from Britain First, a notorious far-right group, and writing that "Network news has become so partisan, distorted and fake that licenses must be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked."<sup>3</sup>

The persistent flow of agonistic and extremist rhetoric coming from the White House has inspired members of the so-called alt-right, who operated on the fringes of society before Trump's campaign and election, to become a visible presence in our national discourse. During the Unite the Right Rally in August, an event protesting the removal of General E. Lee's

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1. Venezuelans as a whole are not excluded on the Travel Ban. Only government officials and their families are affected.

2. See Heather Long, "Why It's Such a Big Deal the Senate Bill Would Add \$1 Trillion to Debt," *The Washington Post*, November 30, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/11/30/senate-gop-tax-plan-would-fall-1-trillion-short-of-trump-administrations-promises-congress-tax-analyst-says/?utm\\_term=.034b59002c7e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/11/30/senate-gop-tax-plan-would-fall-1-trillion-short-of-trump-administrations-promises-congress-tax-analyst-says/?utm_term=.034b59002c7e).

3. "Donald Trump's Noteworthy Tweets as President," *Newsday*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.newsday.com/news/nation/donald-trump-s-noteworthy-tweets-as-president-1.12632966>.

4. Rosie Gray, "Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protestors: 'Some Very Fine People on Both Sides,'" *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-defends-white-nationalist-protestors-some-very-fine-people-on-both-sides/537012/>.

statue from a Charlottesville, Virginia, park, white supremacist James Alex Fields, Jr. sped his car through a gathering of counter protesters, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring many others. For many of us who had participated in the Women's March without injury—or death—Charlottesville was a reminder that times have indeed changed. In response to the event, Trump said that there were “some very fine people on both sides,”<sup>4</sup> igniting a new wave of confusion and disbelief that has now been upstaged as attention turns to new scandals surrounding his presidency.

Just like many of those participating in the Women's March could not have predicted how precarious our national wellbeing would become under Trump's presidency, we did not know how the American political system would stand up to having someone with his views and political agenda in the White House. Although Trump has called Robert Mueller's inquiry into his personal, business, and campaign dealings with Russia a “witch hunt,” the FBI seems to be making some progress toward unraveling the complicated tale of Russia's involvement in the 2016 election. Four people linked to Trump's campaign have been charged, and two, Michael Flynn and George Papadopoulos, have pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI.

While the FBI's investigative work can seem slow compared to the speed at which worrisome storylines come out of the White House, the press has managed to make some hypersonic progress on a very old issue. In October, 2016, the *Washington Post* unveiled a 2005 video in which Trump bragged that, because he is “a star,” women let him “grab them by the pussy.” Many of us thought that his chances of winning ended with that revelation, however, the story seemed to only momentarily slow him down. One of the distinctive features of the Women's March were “pussy hats,” reminding everyone present that Americans had elected to their highest office a man who was caught bragging about mistreating women on camera.

A year later, in October 2017, a different story of alleged sexual predation has resulted in the kind of response that many Americans thought the Trump video should have received. *The New York Times* posted an exposé of indie film producer Harvey Weinstein, which detailed decades of alleged assault against dozens of women, ranging from famous actors to employees. In the weeks that followed, an avalanche of other men in the entertainment industry lost their jobs due to allegations of sexual misconduct, including Kevin Spacey, Jeffrey Tambor, Louis CK, Charlie Rose, and Matt Lauer, to name a few. Soon allegations also confronted Congress, with Senator Al Franken and Representatives Trent Franks and John Conyers resigning their offices after their respective parties demanded they do so. Democrat Doug Jones's victory in the Alabama Senate race can in part be attributed to the fact that Roy Moore, his Republican opponent, faced allegations of past sexual misconduct from nine women, one of them reportedly only 14 at the time.<sup>5</sup>

The question remains, however, whether this wave of firings, resignations, and lost elections caused—at least in part—by sexual misconduct can have an effect on the President of the United States. For now, “at least 15 women have come forward with a wide range of accusations against Trump, ranging from sexual harassment and sexual assault to lewd behavior around them.”<sup>6</sup> As we step toward another year of the Trump presidency, it remains unclear whether the apparent cultural shift toward seeing sexual misconduct as unacceptable will continue to gain momentum or whether it will slow down. Either way, this is the time for those who find Trump's values and his presidency problematic to don our physical and metaphorical pussy hats to continue the work we started last year. Even though many of our fears—and nightmares most of us could not have imagined last year—have come to be, we have also learned that resistance through physical and digital pro-

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5. See Richard Fausset et al., “Roy Moore Gets Trump Endorsement and R.N.C. Funding for Senate Race,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/04/us/politics/roy-moore-donald-trump.html>.

6. Dan Merca, “Women Detail Sexual Allegations Against Trump,” *CNN*, December 12, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/11/politics/donald-trump-women-allegations/index.html>.

7. Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman, “This Is What We Learned by Counting the Women's Marches,” *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/this-is-what-we-learned-by-counting-the-womens-marches/?utm\\_term=.6a6cb31cc33f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/this-is-what-we-learned-by-counting-the-womens-marches/?utm_term=.6a6cb31cc33f).

test, well-researched journalism, and the work of our own political institutions can, in fact, counteract some of the weight of Trump's government.

*A Place at the Table*, which does not document the present but rather events that took place a year ago at the Women's March, is meant to inspire future resistance by capturing and portraying the thoughts and experiences of those who attended a local version of the march. The March originated as separate Facebook events posted by Teresa Shook, Evvie Harmon, Fountain Pearson, and Breanna Butler, inviting people to march on Washington on January 21, 2017, the day after Trump's inauguration. When thousands of people signed up to protest, they decided to consolidate their efforts into one Women's March on Washington. As the movement gained momentum, they received criticism on social media and the press for not having any women of color in their organizing team. They swiftly remedied this by inviting Tamika D. Mallory, Carmen Perez, and Linda Sarsour to join them. The idea of the march then spread to cities around the United States and the world, so that, by the time January 21 rolled around, the Women's March "was likely the largest single-day demonstration in recorded U.S. history."<sup>7</sup> Although it is hard to come up with exact numbers, *The Washington Post* estimates that it "involved between 3,267,134 and 5,246,670 people in the United States (our best guess is 4,157,894). That translates into 1 percent to 1.6 percent of the U.S. population."<sup>8</sup> Sister marches around the world were also numerous. As *The Post* reports, there were "at least 261 marches abroad, with attendance totaling between 266,532 and 357,071 people (our best guess is 307,275 people)."<sup>9</sup>

This essay and *A Place at the Table* try to unpack the experience of the March for those who attended the version that took place in Lansing, Michigan, which was named the March on Lansing. It did not include a lot of movement because the permit granted didn't allow for attendees to block the streets, requiring instead that they stay on the lawn in front of the Capitol. At some point a mini-march began with protesters marching down the streets directly adjacent to the Capitol as a way to bring some movement into our gathering. As this essay and the video show, although there are some aspects to the experience of this iteration of the Women's March that are particular to Lansing, the experience of the march and the issues that attendees stood for are universal. *A Place at the Table* features the voices of 16 attendees: Kate Birdsall, Regina Boone, Sheila Contreras, Everardo Cuevas, Davia Downey, Noor Hassan-Contreras, Catherine Jennings, Peter Johnston, Angelika Kraemer, Chloe Long, Hannah Long, Valerie Long, Allan Martling, Nancy Martling, Joyce Meier, and Naomi Sweo. The interviewees reflect on three questions: why they attended the march, what the experience was like, and what we can do to keep the momentum of the march going. As we hear their disembodied voices, we see footage of the march that brings to life the collective experience of that day.

As I was working on this video, I decided not to make a traditional documentary in which we see the interviewees in talking-head settings and then cut to images that illustrate what they are discussing. I wanted the voices to have no faces so that they could be associated with the images of any of the March on Lansing attendees, performing what Adela Licona and Karma Chávez call relational literacies. They explain that "relational literacies are ripe with coalitional possibility as they can open people to new ways of understanding, learning, imagining, and being in relation to others' stories, interests, and contexts."<sup>10</sup> The experience of joining the March on Lansing that day, surrounded by over 9,000 people while knowing that millions more were marching around the world, felt like we were indeed coming to a new way of relating to the stories of those who around us.

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8. Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman, "This Is What We Learned by Counting the Women's Marches," *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/this-is-what-we-learned-by-counting-the-womens-marches/?utm\\_term=.6a6cb31cc33f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/this-is-what-we-learned-by-counting-the-womens-marches/?utm_term=.6a6cb31cc33f).

9. *Ibid.*

10. Adela C. Licona and Karma R. Chávez, "Relational Literacies and Their Coalitional Possibilities," *Peitho: Journal of the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*, 18, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2015), <http://peitho.cwshrc.org/relational-literacies-and-their-coalitional-possibilities-2/>.

11. *Ibid.*

Attendees told their stories not only orally through conversations with strangers but also through signs, tee-shirts, pussy hats, applause, and cheers. Licóna and Chávez go on to argue that “understood as practices, relational literacies imply the labor of making meaning, of shared knowledges, or of producing and developing new knowledges together. In other words, relational literacies are ... never produced singularly or in isolation but rather depend on interaction.”<sup>11</sup> The experience of standing together and taking in and/or commenting on our fellow attendees’ visual and aural stories was a performance of relational literacies. The story of the March is a complex web of related individual stories that come together into a collective, coalitional story. It would be impossible to portray the whole story of the March, but this documentary provides a snapshot that captures the relational literacies that the event evoked.

Another aspect of the March represented in the video is how well it embodied Fourth Wave feminism. As Kira Cochrane explains, intersectionality and a blend of digital and physical spaces to do activist work characterize Fourth Wave feminism. The term intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and its main goal is for feminists to realize that “different forms of discrimination intersect” and we need to expand “feminist targets and locat[e] the movement within a larger political project.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, in order to improve the lives of women, we must focus on more than traditional women’s issues, such as abortion and equal pay, broadening our understanding of feminism to include a spectrum of social justice issues, from the environment, to racism, to LGBTQ rights, and so on. Women do not live in a vacuum, and feminism is stronger and nimbler if it embraces social justice at large. Although many of the signs at the march featured traditional women’s issues, there were also copious signs protesting intersectional issues like racism, homophobia, and global warming. The strength of the event came in part from the immense variety of issues that attendees felt comfortable protesting that day.

As important as it is for social justice at large to be represented in feminism, building coalitions across different interests is not an easy endeavor. As Santos Ramos and Angélica de Jesús write, “if we are talking about building a broad, cohesive liberation movement, the issue becomes about how to simultaneously be active supporters of adjacent movements while still also fulfilling the cultural and social commitments we have to our own people.”<sup>13</sup> Embracing intersectionality means embracing the reality that the struggle will never end because, even if we win one battle, inequality will thrive in other areas. The question becomes how to choose a few causes and fight for those while respecting that others will choose different causes to tackle. While some signs at the March tried to fit every conceivable issue onto one piece of cardboard, others featured more general messages about resistance without naming what needs to be resisted, and others carried single-issue signs. Through relational literacies we can use the collective message of each sign present at the March to gain a tangible understanding of intersectional feminism at work. However, as the stories featured in the video show, some people felt more welcome at the March than others. For two interviewees of color, there was a sense that the March was a mostly white space that did not represent their intersectional interests. This sense of Otherness, while not visible in the footage, emerges in the interviews and adds complexity to our understanding of the March. Like most experiences in which we bring together members of different groups, the March on Lansing evoked feelings of isolation and rejection in some of its attendees. Intersectionality, like most approaches to social justice, is not an uncomplicated way to engage with the world.

A second aspect of Fourth Wave feminism that was prominent in the Women’s March is the combination of digital and physical spaces in order to per-

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12. Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of Fourth Wave Feminism* (London: Guardian Books, 2013).

13. Santos Ramos and Angélica de Jesús, “Xicano Indigeneity & State Violence: A Visual/Textual Dialogue,” *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* 5, no. 2 (2015), <http://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-5/xicano-indigeneity-state-violence-a-visualtextual-dialogue>.

14. Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women*.

15. *Ibid.*

form activism. As Cochrane explains, the Internet has “brought thousands of new writers to the fore, and in the process, feminist issues have moved from the margins into the mainstream.”<sup>14</sup> The fact that the Women’s March started as Facebook events and became a global phenomenon with millions of attendees around the globe exemplifies the power of social media to mobilize people. Not only did social media allow for the protest to be organized in the first place, but it also allowed attendees to film, photograph, and write about their experiences, sharing the results on social media platforms. Fourth Wave feminists have been criticized at times for performing couch activism. There is a sense that, while Second and Third Wavers use their bodies and actual voices to fight for what they believe in, Fourth Wavers instead click and type in order to fight their social justice battles. Cochrane herself writes, “I’m not suggesting following someone on Twitter or signing a petition has the same significance as joining a political party.”<sup>15</sup> And yet, as the Women’s March showed, those actions are now intermingled. Digital actions can and often do lead to physical actions and vice versa. Moreover, with a president whose public-facing governmental communication happens largely on Twitter, activism on social media and other digital spaces becomes key to practicing resistance to this particular administration.

*A Place at the Table* is Fourth Wave feminism in action. The footage exists because four people—Nathaniel Bowler, Cassidy Johncox, and Sarah Mitchell, and myself—decided to film the march in order to capture this historic moment and because fifteen brave attendees agreed to intimately discuss their experience of the March on Lansing. Some of you will probably share the link where the video and essay are freely available online through social media, helping the ideas brought up by the March extend long beyond that day in January 2017 when millions of disappointed people gathered to protest and to create a more hopeful story for the future. The question of how to keep that spark lit in the years to come is a conundrum that this video attempts to address. None of us has the complete answer, of course, but each one of the interviewees tries to help us find ways to move forward in a meandering, collective, never-ending march toward a better world for all.

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*Alexandra Hidalgo* is an award-winning filmmaker, whose documentaries have been official selections in 11 countries and been screened at universities around the United States. Her videos and activist writing have been featured on *The Hollywood Reporter*, *IndieWire*, *NPR*, and *Women and Hollywood*. Her video book *Cámara Retórica: A Feminist Filmmaking Methodology for Rhetoric and Composition* was published by Computers and Composition Digital Press in 2017. Her academic video essays have been published in *Enculturation*, *Kairos*, *Technoculture*, *Itineration*, *Present Tense*, and *Peitho*. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of *agnès films*, a digital publication that supports the work of women and feminist filmmakers and a managing editor for *constellations* a cultural rhetorics publishing space.

# A Place at the Table

A Public Holistic Response

William Hart-Davidson

Hidalgo uses two documentary techniques in this film - 1) participant point of view (P.O.V.), including footage from participants, and 2) decoupled voiceover and video, with no “head and shoulder” interviews - to emphasize a key element of fourth-wave feminist theory: coalition building. We hear a lot about the need for feminism to practice intersectionality. Here, Hidalgo provides a depiction of enacted intersectionality, one that puts the real work behind the abstraction into sharp focus. We see and hear that it isn't always easy or coherent to do this work, but the words and faces of people on the screen convey the conviction of those dedicated to this praxis.

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