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We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For

Activistas from the New Majority

By Christine Joy Ferrer

At the Empowering Women of Color conference in March this year, I was moved to hear Grace Lee Boggs, in an open dialogue with Angela Davis, say that we must re-imagine everything; change how we think, what we do, to re-invent our society and institutions in order for revolution to happen. And as I listened to female MC and rapper Rocky Rivera give short glimpses into the revolutionary lives of three iconic women activists—Gabriela Silang, Dolores Huerta, and Angela Davis—in the 16 bars of “Heart,” I wondered who would be our next movement builders.

According to a report from United for a Fair Economy—“State of the Dream 2012, the Emerging Majority”—by the year 2030, a majority of U.S. residents under 18 will be youth of color. By 2042, blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and other non-whites will collectively comprise a majority of the U.S. population. But numbers alone are not enough to shift the political and economic landscape if income and wealth remain overwhelmingly in the hands of a small group of whites. Although there have been many social and economic gains made for all races since the Civil Rights Movement, people of color continue to be left behind. The stark disparities that exist today in wealth, income, education, employment, poverty, incarceration, and health are the remnants of hundreds of years of racial oppression. To create a new world, we must sever the connection between race and poverty.

Excerpted here are the voices of young *activistas* who redefine what it means to be part of the new majority as women of color. They have chosen to confront the challenges plaguing their communities and build to eradicate institutionalized confines, while engaging in the struggle for social, economic and environmental justice. In their fight for liberation, they embody that famous quote from African American poet June Jordan: “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”

The *Activistas*

- **Favianna Rodriguez** (favianna.com) is a celebrated printmaker and digital artist based in Oakland, California. Her composites, created using high-contrast colors and vivid figures reflect literal and imaginative migration, global community, and interdependence.
- **Smita Nadia Hussain** is a poet, blogger and photographer who serves in leadership capacities for local young Democrat and API organizations, including Community Health for Asian Americans (CHAA), the English Center and the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF). She recently traveled with Habitat for Humanity to build homes in Vietnam.
- **Shanelle Matthews** (sugarforyoursoul.com) does online media communications for Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, advocating for women of color and families on the margins who have strategically been left out of the socio-political debate on reproductive health and rights.
- **Rocky Rivera** (rockyrivera.com) is a hip hop journalist by day and MC by night who found international acclaim by winning a Contributing Editor position on MTV's docu-series, "I'm From Rolling Stone" (2007).
- **Ya-Ting Liu** is a federal advocate for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign and also the campaign manager for Rider Rebellion at Transportation Alternatives.
- **Raquel Nunez** is a youth organizer for Little Village Environmental Justice Organization.

“I engage in campaigns that look at the intersections between different struggles.” — *Favianna Rodriguez*



Reflections of Activistas

Favianna Rodriguez: Women of Color in the Movement

As a young Latina I felt invisible. I am the daughter of immigrants and grew up in communities of color most of my life. I felt that my immigrant family, our communities were invisible. Yet, we all carried the brunt of what was happening to the economy in the country and even throughout the world. We were experiencing the effects of injustices in our own community. The injustices I saw as a child, the racism that I experienced via the media or the school curriculum, the xenophobia directed at my parents... angered me in a way that I didn't have words for. Art became a way for me to talk about those experiences, reframe them, and do something positive. Making art was a way to have a voice and an empowering way to fight back, instead of acting out on my internalized oppression.

In my work, I approach issues that most affect me as a woman of color and that I see affecting the women around me, whether it's my mother, family or friends. This includes issues around immigrant rights, economic justice, climate change, sexism, patriarchy, and globalization. I think about systems that work to oppress us and take away our agency to be the full humans we want to be. The same forces that are destroying the planet and organizing against workers and supporting the big banks as they rip off people all over the country are passing anti-immigrant laws and leading this conservative assault on women's reproductive rights. I engage in campaigns that look at the intersections between these different struggles.

I've seen more women than ever before question and challenge the frameworks that we have accepted for so long. Women of color in particular are really challenging traditional feminism and thinking about how race is a key part of how we need to analyze being a woman. In the immigrant rights sector, I see women workers organizing for collectives that hold better resources and look at building infrastructures because many unions are not creating that space for immigrant labor—immigrant women in particular. I see women organizers usually outnumber men organizers and more young immigrant queer women are speaking out about their experiences. In the environmental sector, young women are drawing parallels between how we inflict abuse on mother Earth and on women's bodies. Women are finally embracing their complexities and claiming their power. ■

Smita Nadia Hussain: South Asian Freedom Fighters and Refugees

My parents are from Bangladesh, a country birthed from genocide. People were victimized; tongues were cut off. They wanted independence and were literally fighting for their voice. They demanded the right to speak their language and fought for democracy. When the civil war happened in 1971, a lot of the guerilla fighters were women. Many were executed. Half a million women were raped in nine months. Yet, they still stood up.

When people think of Muslim women they think of an arranged marriage or a head covering. But, my grandmother's sisters were doctors and lawyers in their country. They marched and protested for their rights. My great grandmother and her sisters used to march at their university saying they wanted a free country and that women should be free to go out and work.

There's a lot of intersection between issues confronting Muslim women, South Asian immigrants and refugees, and Islamophobia in the United States. Their stories are those behind headlines of war, immigration and political strife.

I'm a part of the East Bay Refugee Forum—a coalition of organizations that work on issues facing API and refugee communities in the Bay Area. Directly and indirectly, these organizations provide necessary services and resources—such as, bus rider information, community events, legal and health clinics, and where to get vaccinations. I do some work also for the English Center, which serves immigrants, international students and professionals who need to improve their communication skills to achieve their goals, find better jobs, attend college, and improve their professional options.

Although there are services out there, with the budget cuts to social services across the country, so many benefits are lost to the point where fear of starvation and homelessness is very real. Within the refugee communities in Oakland, there is a high unemployment rate, much higher than the rest of the country and the rest of California. There's one group called the Karan—a minority group from Burma that came here because of war in their country. They have an 80 percent unemployment rate; higher than any other constituency in Oakland. The economic situation of refugees in Oakland is very troubling. On top of the language issues, many don't have a formal education and no English skills. They are stuck. ■

■ Photos: (Left) Favianna Rodriguez (Right) Smita Nadia Hussain

“All women of color are struggling in this country for access to resources, public assistance, for equality.”

—*Shanelle Matthews*



Reflections of Activistas

Raquel Nunez: Sustainability and the Environment

My passion for environmental justice is ever growing. By the age of 19, I was working to organize around various social justice issues. Over the last eight years, I have created several bodies of artwork with a central focus on social change and youth rights. My goal as an adult ally of the youth at Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) is to continue to grow and sustain an environmental justice youth leadership program. We organize youth by creating a curriculum that we share with high schools and have an open-door policy for anyone who would like to become involved and learn more.

LVEJO is currently focused on creating a sustainable sense of awareness with the volunteers and organization members. There is also a focus on creating more parks and garden spaces in the community, and a clear air campaign that is working on the site remediation of a retired coal-fired power plant. LVEJO partnered with the Chicago Clean Power coalition for the clean air campaign. This partnership was the catalyst for closing the two coal-fired power plants in the Chicago area.

Our current day institutions are crumbling but this has happened throughout history. The key is empowering people and opening spaces where they can learn the skills they need to thrive. Education, communication and new ideas go hand-in-hand. If we could change the way that we deal with one another and speak with one another, a natural evolution will happen through community dialogue. Self-knowledge is a critical component and revolution is the natural result of any community gaining self-knowledge on an individual basis.

With the current crisis intensifying the number of people experiencing poverty and food insecurity, community gardens and open space help people weather economic storms, inspire self-reliance and enhance health through increased access to whole foods, good nutrition and physical exercise. They also provide a common space for intergenerational interaction and knowledge sharing.

It is important to increase funding for social services, open spaces and community gardens that build local food self-sufficiency and support fair access to fresh food. I believe, in order to improve community resiliency, we must strengthen local food and gardening knowledge through education in traditional foods, permaculture and sustainable agriculture techniques. It's about providing our communities, youth and elders with business and leadership development training through gardening and food-based entrepreneurial opportunities. ■

Shanelle Matthews: Reproductive Health

The way women of color activate themselves in their communities is different from the way white women do it. All women of color are struggling in this country for access to resources, public assistance, equality. Black women are harmed by a lack of solidarity because we are often stigmatized as insatiable and hypersexual. The commodification of our bodies is something that is left out of the conversation.

The environmental impacts on black women's bodies are ever present. From slavery to hurricane Katrina, we are the first to be displaced, denied resources and access to healthcare, denied opportunities to save our families. When you deny a woman an option to take care of herself, her reproductive rights, you are ensuring that she is going to withdraw from the workforce, thus increasing the capital for white men.

The foundational fabric of this country lies in racism and socio-economic status. It is almost safe to say that most black women are at the bottom of the socio-economic totem pole. To start working towards equality for all women, we must insert a racial and class analysis and build solidarity across color and gender lines. If we don't acknowledge privilege in this country, we won't be able to navigate through this conversation.

We have organizations working for the broader benefit of women that are leaving out low-income women and women of color. We must teach others about what we need, letting them know that it is our race that intersects with our class to deprive us of the things that they can easily access. We must educate those who are shifting policy for women that they need to include the intersection of race and class.

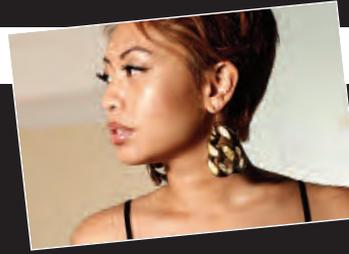
At Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ), our primary initiative is the 10-year-old Strong Families for changing the way people think, feel and act in support of families. We recognize that only 25 percent of families in America look like the hetero-normative, married-with-biological-children type that policy would have us believe. Seventy-five percent of us are queer, low-income, immigrant, refugee, families of color, and families with disabilities.

We are engineering a campaign, along with several other organizations, to shift policy so that it reflects the needs of families on the margins. We utilize the reproductive justice framework that says people should be able to empower themselves and their communities to make those socio-political decisions that are best for them and their families. ■

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“Public transit is a vital service that connects people to opportunity that allows for social and economic mobility.”

— Ya-Ting Liu



Reflections of Activistas

Rocky Rivera: Misogyny and Women Revolutionaries

As a pinay, female emcee and artist in the hip hop industry, I deal with misogyny so much. Every time I infiltrate this male circle, I must not fall into the “Here, let me show some skin and get your attention!” because that’s so easy to do. As a woman of color in the industry, you’re marginalized, hyper-sexualized, not allowed to “play” with the boys, and not treated as a peer. The young women who aren’t coming into it with a conscious mind, they’re just hoping to gain acceptance from the mostly male hip hop audience and most times, you’re treated as a novelty.

Hip hop was once underground, something that young blacks and Latinos in the Bronx created. They did what they had to do to make music. They were oppressed and rebelling. It was an empowering movement. Now 30 plus years later, it has become a commodity. But it all starts from the communities that have nothing... as a voice for the people. Once capitalism gets a hold of it, it ruins it. Capitalism took hold of the formula and squeezed all the creativity and originality out to package and market it—to white people. There is no depth to mainstream hip hop. Women are objectified, disrespected, and men are mere caricatures of themselves and stereotypes.

My rhyme is basically my world where every woman is respected and allowed to be a woman. She’s not limited, she has a voice, she’s strong, she’s vulnerable, she’s multidimensional. Rocky Rivera represents the woman that’s not compromising her values just to be in the entertainment industry.

My song “Heart,” speaks of Angela Davis, Gabriela Silang, and Dolores Huerta. Not a lot of people know who they are and they should be known alongside the Cesar Chavezes, Malcolm Xs and Martin Luther Kings because they were fighting not only for Third World liberation and people of color but also for women. There was a double oppression that they had to overcome in order to be the organizers they were.

There aren’t a lot of women artists out there that speak of our history and our progress as a people. I knew that given the opportunity, I would definitely be speaking on behalf of all women, especially women of color. At the end of the day, if our male activists are injured or murdered, it’s our women revolutionaries who are still left fighting. ■

Ya-Ting Liu: Transportation Justice

My family moved here from Taiwan when I was seven years old. We couldn’t afford a car. The bus was our only way to get around and we used it for everything. Public transit is a vital service that connects people to opportunity and allows for social and economic mobility. It’s just as important as education, health care and jobs. Rural, suburban communities also depend on transit and when bus service is cut, folks are literally stranded without any other way to get to work.

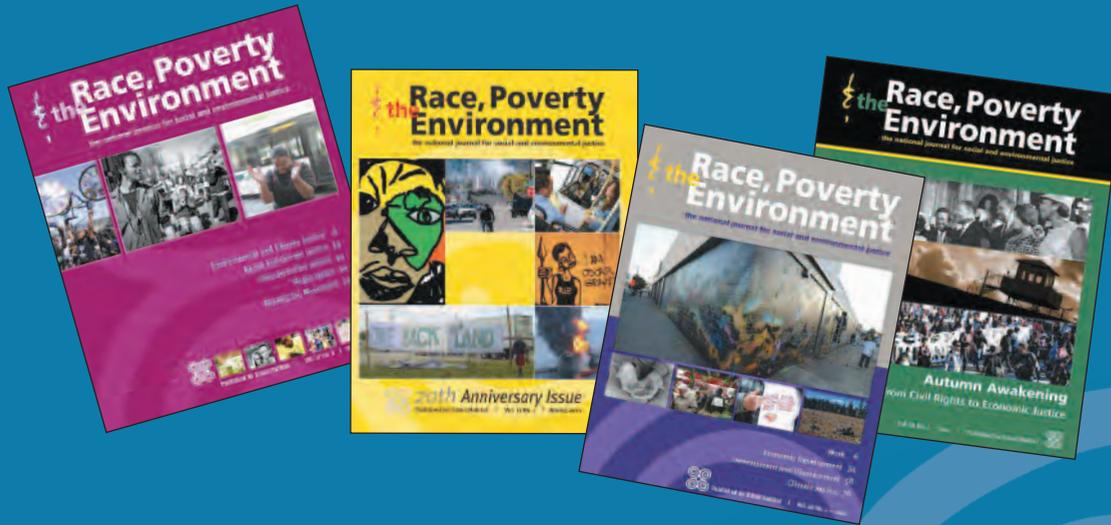
New York City boasts the largest and only 24-hour public transit system in the country. Its buses and subways carry 7.5 million daily riders who make up about one third of all mass transit users in the United States. Fares cover about 60 percent of bus and subway operating costs, so service continues to deteriorate due to lack of adequate investment from the state and the city.

Since 2007, New York transit riders have been fed a steady diet of fare hikes and service cuts due largely to the lack of leadership and political will of elected officials at the state level who control and determine how public transit is run and funded. The Rider Rebellion campaign was created in 2010 to organize transit riders to hold elected officials accountable for the quality of our transit service. We’re mobilizing outer borough communities disproportionately impacted by fare hikes and service cuts by partnering with community-based organizations and local elected officials. We’re also hitting the streets and surveying bus and subway riders directly about the quality of their commute and the improvements they’d like to see.

Nationally, we’re grappling with the legacy of auto-centric transportation planning and policies from the 1950s, when gas was 20 cents a gallon. Now we find ourselves in a very different world where we’re paying a very high price for oil dependency, which is also taking a toll on our climate. Transportation accounts for one-third of our country’s carbon footprint. Auto-centric planning has also led to neighborhoods without safe places to walk, bike and play.

If laws and policies were made purely on merit and based on measurable goals instead of politics, we would have a very different way of prioritizing government resources. If transportation investment decisions were made based on reducing congestion, fossil fuel dependency, job creation, and equitable access, transit projects would be a top priority every time. ■

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