

COLONIZE THIS!

YOUNG WOMEN
OF COLOR ON
TODAY'S FEMINISM

New Edition

EDITED BY DAISY HERNÁNDEZ
AND BUSHRA REHMAN



SEAL PRESS

Migrant Organizing

A Retelling

SONIA GUÑANSACA

November 2016. My mother sends me a text, “Ganó el Trump.” My throat tightens and my chest collapses into an incredible heartache. I am glad she did not call me, because I have no idea how to answer, what kind of lies to make up, or what kind of miracles to wish for. I don’t want to tell my undocumented mother what this means for our migrant communities.

This all feels completely different compared to when Obama won the election in 2008. On the campaign trail, he had promised to help undocumented youth like me. He had promised to help my mother, father, and grandpa. The night he became the first Black president of the United States, I was at a bar on Twenty-Third Street in Manhattan with migrant organizers, and we cheered until our lungs had had enough. Not only was my president Black, but the first lady would be a Black woman who had grown up in Chicago and looked like every teacher and professional I’d looked up to. Two Black girls would be running around the White House. Oh, how we cried that night. For us, young women of color, to watch Michelle, Malia, and Sasha onstage affirmed our right to this country. Laughter filled the streets of the city. A new time for people of color was finally here.

But nothing changed, did it? More deportations took place under Obama. There was a rise of deaths at the border, a rise of privatized detention centers, a rise of unaccompanied minors crossing. There was no comprehensive immigration reform or amnesty, and the Dream Act never passed.

What did change was the rise of undocumented young people organizing.

REWIND

I leave Ecuador in 1995, around the same time Tupac is signing to Death Row Records. I migrate at the age of five to reunite with my parents in New York City. My dad came before I was born, and my mom a year or two after she gave birth to me. But I want it to be known that I existed before “migration.” I existed in a magical, multidimensional way with my parents. In those years, before text messages, before Skype and FaceTime, I spoke to my parents on payphones with calling cards.

*We survive through phone lines
A cycle of dialing numbers
On the other line waited abuela
On the other line waited memories
On the other line waited birthday wishes
That should have been given in person
While eating guava cake
But we were here
And you were there
On the other line we waited
By payphones we waited
For your voice we waited
That is all we had*

When I arrived in New York, my parents came to pick me up from the care of the man who had brought me. I was seated on a plastic-covered couch in a Brooklyn apartment wearing denim overalls and sporting a bad bob haircut. I had a mouthful of cavities. I did not recognize my parents. I'd had no way of knowing what they looked like because we'd been dirt poor in Ecuador, and no one could afford cameras. I had to hear their voices.

My parents, however, did know what I looked like, because distant relatives who would come to Ecuador would visit us and record videos of me dancing and walking around el campo. There is a video of me singing to *Dos Mujeres*, *Un Camino* in my dad's video collection.

My parents enrolled me in PS 161, where Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican kids were all too familiar with migration. We "assimilated" into the public school system. Our names lost the tildes over the n's. We memorized the Pledge of Allegiance, and we entered linguistic warfare when our Spanish was seen as basic and we were made to learn and speak "proper English."

My undocumented status did not come up so much during this time. At home, it was normal to discuss immigration status; we knew that my parents and my grandpa and I were waiting for "papers." When will our immigration papers come? No one knew. My own immigration status and shaming was not something I had to think about, but I worried for my parents whenever they went to work, or when my dad drove around without a license. This became our prayer: *Avoid. Police. Avoid. Handcuffs. Avoid. Deportation.*

ALGUN DÍA

When I was in middle school and given an opportunity to go out of state for a school trip, my parents told me I could not go. I didn't have the identification to get on a plane. So I stayed put in our

neighborhood in Harlem. *Algun día*, they told me. *Algun día* became two, five, eight, ten, eleven, fifteen years later. In high school, my strict global studies teacher, Mr. Murphy, and English teacher, Mrs. Greene, introduced me to the Young Lords, the Black Panthers, Assata Shakur, Toni Morrison, and many other brilliant Black writers and poets. These readings comforted me as I began to think about college and my future. Here were cultural workers who had chronicled their times by weaving stories and critiques of race and class. I only saw them in these two dimensions.

Feminism did not make its way down Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard toward my high school, or at least not the academic jargon. I understood feminism informally. It was the absence of Black women heroes in Black History Month, or Latina women heroes in Hispanic Month, or why Mami was paid less than her cis men coworkers, or why many migrant women were doing domestic work.

While I was in high school, my parents took multiple odd jobs to pay rent and bills. Some weekdays, I would accompany them to deliver newspapers. Waking up at 3 a.m., we headed to a warehouse where mostly Black and Brown migrants rolled up newspapers and coupons with those damn rubber bands that snapped on your fingers if you pulled too tight. I pulled them tight so many times, trying to rush so that we could go home early, so that my dad could get some sleep before his other job.

I also interpreted for my parents in situations where they needed someone who could speak English. Gulping down my fears, I stood in between the cable company and my dad. I had to interpret every single word perfectly. This was my service to my parents for their hard work.

As I grew older, I learned how to code-switch and how to fend for my parents. They deserved this and much more. The statement

I will provide for them became almost a song on loop in my mind. Because I wanted to take care of them, it was hard to know that college might not be a reality. “High school will be the highlight of your life,” my college adviser told me. Saddened and disappointed, but also determined, I started to research my options, and from another undocumented Black migrant I learned about the City University of New York (CUNY) and applied to Hunter College.

I was not the only one whose school and college adviser failed them. There were a couple of other students in my school, mostly girls from Jamaica and Nigeria who were in a similar situation as me. We exchanged scholarship information, and we cheered each

“While the rest of the senior class worried about prom, fellow undocumented classmates and I were worried about our college applications being forwarded to immigration, and consequently their coming to deport our families.”

other on. We set our minds on finding ways to continue our education. While the rest of the senior class worried about prom, fellow undocumented classmates and I were figuring out payments and basic enrollment because we were also the first in our families to be applying to college. Fuck a prom dress and limo; we were worried about our college applications being forwarded to immigration, and consequently their coming to deport our families.

My friends and I were accepted to CUNY, and at that time, we were able to qualify for in-state tuition. My friend Kayan and I both received scholarships from the Jewish Foundation for Education of Women. That’s how we were able to enroll for our first couple of semesters. The whole college process forced me to come out publicly as undocumented

to teachers, administrators, and deans. By 2007, more people knew about my undocumented status.

ACADEMIC ROBOTIC TIMELINE (AKA ACHY MEMORIES)

Community leaders tell you that laws will give you meaning

So you begin to recite

Yes, sir. I am a skilled worker

Yes, sir. I can contribute

No, sir. I haven’t committed any crimes

Pinned. Against. One. Another

You remember that your mother almost didn’t make it through the border

Or any legislation being drafted on

And this time around

She won’t make it into health-care packages

She won’t be remembered during press conferences

She will be dissected

Researched, researched, researched

And research about how much she doesn’t belong will be published

Thousands of undocumented students across the country were dealing with the same reality I was. In 2008, when I attended a Young People For (YP4) summit in Washington, DC, I met a migrant organizer, Jennifer, who told me of an undocumented-led New York organization that had just been formed to work toward relief for undocumented young people. She was a young woman of color who was telling me there were more folks like me trying to do something about this bullshit immigration system. I joined this

immigrant organization, and for the next six years I mobilized and organized undocumented youth in New York City.

We used social media platforms to coordinate, to come out as undocumented to one another, and to build an ecosystem of undocumented organizing and leadership. Imagine our Gchats filled with correspondence about next actions, about where to meet and what supplies to bring. We traded Facebook and Myspace messages about legislation, and which Senate staffers we had to respond to and organize against. Simultaneously, we left each other messages about fears, love, broken marriages, abortions, latest chisme, and depression. We disrupted borders via the Internet. It didn't matter that the mainstream headlines were yet to come. We made digital organizing work for grassroots change. In person, we organized in locations that other established immigrant organizations did not want to associate with, like trailer parks in Alabama.

During this time, it was understood that we had power; we could leverage it, and we could influence legislation. Do you know who was at the forefront of all this? Undocumented Queer women of color, Femmes, and nonbinary and gender-nonconforming folks. We were Black and Brown. We were fat and skinny and in between. We hated caps and gowns, were bilingual, often had strong accents, and worked multiple jobs. We had loud mouths and big personalities. We were introverts, awkward, artists, poets, hijab-wearing, messy daters, and loyal Converse shoe wearers. We had the occasional bad eyebrows.

Contrary to what has been reported, the organizing that has happened among undocumented young people has not been the first movement nor is it isolated. It has been built on a lineage of resistance from those organizing for Queer liberation and Black liberation to the sanctuary movement of the 1980s that protected

war refugees from Central America. The 2006 immigrant marches especially gave us direction. So, no, our movement did not come from foundations, nonprofits, or allies. The work came from our casitas in Texas, Illinois, California, Missouri, even Maine. This was before organizations like United We Dream and the National Immigrant Youth Alliance. This was before splits in movements and mainstream tokenization.

Don't believe the hype that the undocumented resistance was built by light-skinned cisgender straight men. Erasure has played a key role in why many of our names go unrecognized: Tania, Lizbeth, Maria, Alaa, Kemi, Daniela, Razeen, Yahaira, Viridiana, Jackie, Tereza, Tam, Cinthya, Reyna, Bamby, ____—insert our mothers' names here, and many other names that have been erased and mispronounced whenever people have written about undocumented, unapologetic leaders and the history of the immigrant rights movement. These were the women and gender-nonconforming organizers responsible for the first online petitions to stop the deportation of undocumented young people. We created the leadership and organizing training toolkits that many folks use today and designed the first National Coming Out poster for undocumented youth. We were the coordinators and participants of the first action that took place in 2010 at the office of Senator John McCain urging him to vote for the Dream Act (#McCain5). We were responsible for taking over the Hart Senate Office Building that same year. Picture twenty-one undocumented youth demanding that senators, both Democrat and Republican, vote on the Dream Act (#Dream21). We were drafters of many local legislative proposals, including the NY Dream Act, and creators of #undocuqueer. We were the ones infiltrating detention centers and leading some of the biggest border-crossing actions. We were the reason why Deferred Action

for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) became a reality for thousands of undocumented young people in 2012.

There is a lineage. Let their names be sung and recited over and over again. Let the change they strived for be named. These change-makers were my sisters, my friends, my chosen family, and my support system. We were responsible for changing the nation's sentiments about undocumented migrant young people. We amplified our narratives and forever shifted migration discourse even if we weren't held up publicly. We did the work to claim our lives.

Back then, as we innovated and shifted history, we didn't have the language to contextualize exactly what we were doing. The work was urgent. Feminism was not the word we used. It felt too rigid, like the papers we wanted. First- and second-wave white feminist scholars had never grouped me under their umbrella of feminism, and I had not wanted to be a part of that anyway. White feminism left out women like my mother, women who are poor, migrant, who do not get to graduate from high school, who are domestic workers—women of color who cannot dare to imagine their problems simply being about a right to vote or gender equality just being about ascending to white male roles. I craved equity in my feminism. I craved melanin. I craved a complex understanding of bodies of color living and surviving in a capitalist patriarchy and in a xenophobic, antequer, antimigrant, cis-sexist, violent world.

Professor Rupal Oza at the Women and Gender Studies Department at Hunter College had a thick accent that made academic words coming out of her mouth sound just like how I pronounced them. She made me feel like I belonged in her classroom with the white students, and she introduced me to the work of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term “intersectionality” to describe how antidiscrimination laws fail Black women by considering gender and race as separate experiences. I began to realize

that the organizing many of us were doing, and even just the way we moved through the world—this is what Dr. Crenshaw was writing about back in 1989. We were Queer, and undocumented, and Brown, and Black, and Latinx, and API, and Femme, and poor, and gender nonconforming, and bilingual, and women, and Muslim, and healers, and nonbinary. When we interacted with institutions and when we pushed for legislation, we brought our full selves to the table.

My understanding of feminism began to grow. Audre Lorde's writing and poetry reminded me that “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives.”¹ This statement helped me process the way I existed in America, especially as a Queer woman of color *and* migrant (not either/or). And Chandra Mohanty's essay “Under Western Eyes” helped me build my macro-understanding of my positioning in the United States and the Global South.²

As I was becoming more unapologetic about my undocumented status then, I was also getting comfortable with calling myself a “feminist.” The scholarship and lived experiences of these feminists of color helped me to claim the identity. It felt good to speak an inclusive, intentional, intersectional feminist language and to make it my own. This helped me be in dialogue with June Jordan, bell hooks, Janet Mock, Tracee Ellis Ross, Grace Lee Boggs, Octavia Butler, Sandra Cisneros, Ryka Aoki, Alice Walker, and many others. This feminism was something I could be proud of and claim; my *mami querida* wouldn't be left behind in this type of feminism.

DEPARTURES AND RECONCILIATION

I am afraid to say that I became resentful of the world around me. I couldn't watch anything without thinking how easy those characters had it or how detention and borders would have impacted the

story line. I watched *Walking Dead* and wondered how many mothers and children would have become zombies in detention centers. I watched *How to Make It in America* and wondered about the possibility of Kid Cudi's friend being undocumented.

The organizing work took me away from home. I was not present during my sister's teenage years because I was busy getting arrested for actions or I was at community meetings that ran late into the night. My romantic relationship back then suffered because I had not been honest about my bandwidth and I skipped out on therapy sessions. I took on too many deportation cases and ultimately was alone, haunted by paperwork and the alien numbers of those detained. I, along with everyone else, was doing this work in the name of "migrant rights," but we were also working out of scarcity and trauma.

The identity and empowerment we had built around the words "undocumented" and "dreamer" also began to burn the back of my throat. The mainstream media loved "dreamers," but they did not love "immigrants" or "refugees." I am scared to share this but I admit to being complicit in creating the good vs. bad immigrant narrative. We had debates over caps and gowns, who was more "undocumented," who was good for the camera, whose story was more compelling, who was able to prove they were oppressed, which part of Georgia we could build with, and who we would isolate. Meanwhile, I was beginning to realize that my identity was solely built around the lack of status—which meant it was an identity constructed by the US government.

As I write this, and look back, I think of what Roxane Gay calls a "bad feminist." That was me. I was full of contradictions, but it does not take away from my lived experience or contributions toward migrant rights. If anything, it leaves room for me to be tender to my younger self and understand that I was barely surviving, and

that this big amerikkkan machine really had a grip on me and all of us.

But hope began to leave. It left after the Dream Act did not get enough votes in the Senate in 2010, and it left when more of our community members were deported, and when Black migrants were marginalized in our own organizing, and when people did not care about Trans detainees or those with criminal backgrounds.

Those of us who were artists left political legislative organizing for cultural spaces and cultural strategies. No more reactionary work. No more narrative correction of what we were not. We wanted to create narratives that illustrated our experiences with nuance. We were more than just the ways we could be productive for the economic benefit of this country. We were more than labor. We yearned to feel whole. No more "Olympic oppressions." We were done with "good immigrant" storytelling. We did not want storytellers telling our stories. We were going to write our own damn stories.

In 2011, I began to create intentional writing spaces in New York City by and for undocumented writers. These were monthly writing workshops, later accompanied by performance spaces known as "UndocuMics" (safe spaces for undocumented artists to share their work). This, unknowingly, was my attempt to organize cultural space and to innovate intentional pipelines for undocumented artists who were not being given the resources to thrive. It was an attempt to reconcile the need to call something *home*.

I was not alone in this. There were other contemporary undocumented artists, mostly Queer and women of color, also strategizing to create. Informally, we created an artist network, sharing with each other tips, dreams, and applications for residencies and funding. We mentored each other. We cheered for each other. In 2013, Kemi Bello, Marco Antonio Flores, and I started the UndocuWriting

retreat—the first-ever writing retreat in the nation for and by undocumented writers. This project was powered by CultureStrike, a national arts organization that I had just started working with during that time. The first UndocuWriting retreat happened in Sausalito, California, by the beach. Twelve undocumented writers from across the country, chosen from a pool of more than a hundred applications, flew for the first time on planes toward the Pacific Ocean to work with faculty writers like Staceyann Chin. Later we partnered with the Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation (VONA), creating scholarships and additional funding to send undocumented writers to VONA's annual writing program. Kemi and I created Undocumenting.com, the first online platform highlighting undocumented artists. Undocumented artists and cultural workers were building the conditions for culture equity for migrant art ten years ago. Now we want large art institutions, publishing houses, philanthropy hubs, and others to stop perpetuating migrant stories as a form of spectatorship, and instead to invest in the creativity of those who are embodied in undocumented experiences. It is not enough to disrupt borders in the policy field; we must do it in the cultural space. Here is where we do long-lasting disruption and change; here is where we change hearts and minds, where we create a tide of possibility for our communities to imagine what a world without prisons, detention centers, and borders would look like.

My feminism taught me to pay close attention to where the imbalance manifests itself. My involvement in these art and cultural spaces has led me to witness who gets to imagine and create. We already know that our cultural spaces are mostly dominated by white people and white cis hetero men. I am afraid to write that even in our own people-of-color cultural spaces it is mostly cis men who are giving us permission to play and experiment. Their projects are

mentored and funded. We perpetuate an absence of visibility of migrant Femme/women of color/gender-nonconforming artists. What this says to me is that even in the imagination, we have a whole battle for gender equity to fight.

PRESENT

As I myself begin to identify as gender nonconforming, life is becoming more complicated. The feminism that I am moving with is one that honors all genders, that honors fluidity, that honors non-Anglo identification, respects all pronouns, and does not center on “pussy” power. The feminism that I am moving with now is one that fights for all people and meets people where they are, and where they are hurting, and allows them to create a language that suits them best.

I am also no longer undocumented. Two years ago I was able to adjust my immigration status through my partner at the time. When the green card arrived in the mail, inside the white envelope was a pamphlet with the words “Welcome to America” written all over it. At this point, I want to say that I took the pamphlet and I tore it into pieces.

I am lying. The pamphlet still sits in a folder in my parents' apartment.

Two years later, I am not sure how to make sense of my shift in immigration status. It often used to feel like I was going to be in this battle for an eternity, like most undocumented people are. What do you do when your whole existence for more than twenty-two years was constructed on the absence of papers? No one prepared me for this moment.

I have certain privileges now, and I have responsibilities. My parents will never be able to retire like most white middle-class families. Papa Jerry, my abuelo, will never get the same health care

as I am now able to access. So I am left to imagine alternative ways for him to get medical care that go beyond Vicks and prayers to la Virgen. My mother waitresses for the same universities where I am invited to speak. She stands on the balls of her feet for eight hours straight, and sometimes the money she makes at these jobs does not pay for all her bills. This means I show up for them financially. This sometimes (most times) means I hold emotional space for them. This means that as I think of my own retirement plans or future goals, I carry them with me in every decision. No one is left behind.

Two trips to Ecuador have taught me about the toll that being undocumented has taken. I did not get to be with my grandparents when they died. In Ecuador, I videotaped their tombstones and their old casita, and I traveled back with this footage on my iPhone to show my parents. But I have not healed from all those lost memories. I have not healed from the years taken away from me to move around freely without fear of being deported or separated from my family. I am afraid now to wonder who I am outside of my immigration status. The phrase “I am neither from here nor there” is settling too comfortably in my stomach. The first time I returned to Ecuador, family and friends did not claim me. Instead, they called me “American.” Where is home, now?

FAST-FORWARD

On election night in 2016, my mother sends me a text but I do not respond immediately. It’s the ending of Obama, the beginning of Trump. Instead I text my Queer, gender-nonconforming, and Trans friends and chosen family. A range of texts fly across the country:

Maybe we have to leave the country
It is not going to be safe

Log off social media
Please be careful
I can’t do this anymore
We will organize
I love you

My phone feels heavy from so much sorrow. We know what’s coming: We will make it through the Trump years but the “we” will be smaller and wounded. Many people will not make it. In just his first year in office, there will be so much Black death, Queer and Trans death. More people will become incarcerated, deported, and exploited. Temporary Protected Status (TPS) will be taken away from many folks, especially from Black migrants, and courts will uphold the Muslim ban.

In our dark bedroom on election night, I disappear in the bed with my Queer, Trans partner as we hold hands. Whispering as if to avoid speaking into truth, whispering as if to keep this from our gods, we speak about what this will mean for our communities. What will happen to Trans folks? What will happen to our sick and disabled families? What will happen to poor communities? What will happen to undocumented migrant and refugee people? “We will exist as we always do,” we say. We will create. We will disrupt, we will heal, we will imagine. We will continue to be here.