Title
Women Who Misbehave (And Change the World)

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z16d64h

Author
Hant, Myna A.

Publication Date
2011-04-01
Several years ago I saw a bumper sticker that read “Well-Behaved Women Rarely Make History.” I was intrigued by that and wondered who are the women who misbehave, what makes them misbehave, and how do they change the world? These were the questions that propelled me to establish a lecture series that I call “Women Who Misbehave,” with such themes as the Second Half of Life, the Suffrage Movement, Religious Feminists and Women Adventurers. It is, obviously, a highly subjective endeavor as there are so many women who have challenged cultural standards to promote change. Some of the women I choose are very well-known, some have been largely ignored by history, and some, although well-known in their time, are basically forgotten now.

Initially, and because I do research on media coverage of older women, I chose several women who are distinctive because they have continued prodigious activity well into the second half of life: Coco Chanel, Dolores Huerta, Katharine Hepburn and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, my favorite activist and intellect. Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s story can’t be told, however, without her compatriots Susan B. Anthony, the Pankhurst family, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Alice Paul. Stanton’s spunk in tackling the Bible with her feminist interpretation of the sacred texts in the Woman’s Bible (1898) led me to think about very religious women who incorporate feminism today into their religious practices. Orthodox Jews such as Rachel Adler, Blu Greenberg Judith
Plaskow; Catholics such as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Elizabeth Johnson; and Muslims such as Shirin Ebadi and Irshad Manji are all modern believers grappling with patriarchal religions. There are also women who are driven not by a cause or religion as much as their sense of adventure. Gertrude Bell, the most famous female archaeologist of her time, Freya Stark, Isak Dinesen, and Beryl Markham belie the notion that women cannot physically handle untamed environments.

I just completed a lecture series on African American women, many of whom are not given enough coverage in current textbooks. These extraordinary women combatted, and are combatting, racial as well as gender issues. I covered, all too briefly, slavery (1619-1865), reconstruction (1865-1877) and its aftermath, the civil rights movement (1955-1968), the black power movement (1966-1975) and black feminism (1973-present).

Two of the most well-known women in the slavery period were Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) and Harriet Tubman (1820-1913). Tubman, who was an abolitionist and activist, made thirteen missions to rescue more than 70 slaves: “I nebber run my train off de track and I nebber los’ a passenger.” Truth, who was an abolitionist and women’s rights advocate, spoke out about the horrors of slavery but also addressed the issue of equality for women:

There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but a word about the colored women: and if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women and it will be just as bad as before. I used to work in the field and bind grain, keeping up with the cradler; but
Two great leaders of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were born during reconstruction: Ida B. Wells and Mary McLeod Bethune. Wells was a journalist and an outspoken crusader against lynching and an advocate for women’s rights and suffrage. Her deeds were lauded in this tribute from poet Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman:

Go, thou brave woman leader  
Spread our wrongs from shore to shore  
Until clothed with his rights is the Negro  
And lynchings are no more  
And the wise Afro-American mother  
Who her children of heroine tells  
Shall speak in tones of gratitude  
The name of Ida B. Wells

Wells’ contemporary, Mary McLeod Bethune, believed that education would be the foundation for women to stand “side by side with the finest men the state has been able to produce” (*Building a Better World*, Audrey Thomas). She founded a school for African Americans, which eventually became Bethune-Cookman University.

Rosa Parks vividly represents the civil rights movement when she asserts, in *My Story*, “People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

Angela Davis, who was associated with radical feminism and the black power movement of the 1970s, is an academic who sees not only the black struggle, but the disconnect between black men and black women in the movement:

I became acquainted very early with the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some black male activists—namely to confuse their political activity with an assertion of their maleness….These black men view black women as a threat to their attainment of manhood—especially those black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right. ([Angela Davis: An Autobiography]

Intellectual activist and author Alice Walker addresses the stereotypes of mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and jezebel and dares to analyze black male/female relationships.

*The stereotypical image of the black woman as strong and powerful so dominates the consciousness of most Americans that even if a black woman is clearly conforming to sexist notions of femininity and passivity she may be characterized as tough, domineering and strong. (Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism)*

These women dramatically recreated the world. To understand their stories is to gain inspiration and courage for one’s own transformation.

Myrna A. Hant has been a CSW Research Scholar since 2001. She received her Ph.D. in Higher Education from UCLA. She was a college administrator as well as an instructor in Women’s Studies at Chapman University. Her lecture series is given through UCLA Extension.

Photo credits: Photo of Angela Davis, Berlin, 1973, Commons:Bundesarchiv, via Wikimedia Commons; photo of Sojourner Truth from National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, via Wikimedia Commons; and photo of Ida B. Wells Barnett from Project Gutenberg ebook *Sparkling Gems of Race Knowledge Worth Reading* (1897) by James T. Haley, via Wikimedia Commons.