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Nancy C. Unger


To cite this article: Nancy C. Unger (2019) Legacies of Belle La Follette's Big Tent Campaigns for Women's Suffrage, *American Journalism*, 36:1, 51-70, DOI: [10.1080/08821127.2019.1572412](https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2019.1572412)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2019.1572412>



Published online: 11 Apr 2019.



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Legacies of Belle La Follette's Big Tent Campaigns for Women's Suffrage

By Nancy C. Unger

In countless speeches and articles in La Follette's Magazine, Belle Case La Follette urged that women needed the vote to secure "standards of cleanliness and healthfulness in the municipal home," and because "home, society, and government are best when men and women keep together intellectually and spiritually." This range of often mutually exclusive arguments created an inclusive big tent. However, arguing that women were qualified to vote by their roles as wives and mothers while maintaining that gender was superfluous to suffrage also contributed to an uneasy combination that would continue the conflict over women's true nature and hinder their activism for decades to come.

On April 26, 1913, Belle Case La Follette (1859–1931), editor of the Home and Education feature of *La Follette's Magazine* (published today as the *Progressive*), testified before the US Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage. She had long argued that women merited the vote based on their service as “public housekeepers.”¹ The fifty-four-year-old La Follette used some of the ten minutes allotted to her to expand on this argument based on women's traditional domesticity: “One fundamental reason for equal suffrage is that it will arouse homemakers of today to a realization that they can only do their part—the part their mothers and grandmothers did—for the home when they use the ballot to secure these standards of cleanliness and healthfulness for the municipal home which were established in earlier times for the isolated home.” Yet La Follette also cited more democratic reasons, testifying that “home, society, and government are best

Nancy C. Unger is Professor and Chair in the Department of History at Santa Clara University, 203A O'Connor Hall, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA, 95053, nunger@scu.edu.

¹Belle Case La Follette (hereafter BCL), “Women as Public Housekeepers,” *La Follette's Magazine* (hereafter *LM*) 2, no. 42, October 22, 1910, 10.

when men and women keep together intellectually and spiritually, where they have the widest range of common interests, where they share with each other the solutions to their common problems.” She called women’s suffrage “a simple matter of common sense.”²

This combination of arguments to promote women’s suffrage created an inclusive and big tent that would attract a diverse group of supporters in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As the Letters to the Editor of *La Follette’s* reveal, readers who believed that women were inherently maternal and more moral than men found one set of arguments compelling, while feminists who rejected all claims of women’s moral superiority reacted favorably to the other set.³ *La Follette* was hardly alone among prominent suffrage advocates in promoting this approach, termed “Janus faced” by women’s historian Nancy Cott. Although the word “feminist” was rarely used before 1910, Cott has written, “Nineteenth-century feminists could (and did) argue on egalitarian grounds for equal opportunity in education and employment for equal rights in property, law, and political representation, while also maintaining that women would bring special benefits to public life by virtue of their particular interests and capacities.”⁴ Cott further noted that when the word “feminism” came into frequent use in 1913 and into common parlance by 1916, its meaning continued to feature this “characteristic doubleness,” a “simultaneous affirmation of women’s human rights and women’s unique needs and differences.”⁵ For all its wide appeal, however, arguing that women were qualified to vote by their roles as wives and mothers while maintaining that being female was superfluous to suffrage contributed to an uneasy combination that would continue to encourage debate over women’s essential nature and hinder their rights activism for decades to come.

Suffragist and leading feminist Alice Paul hailed *La Follette* as “the most consistent supporter of equal rights of all the women of her time.”⁶ Nevertheless, she is far less known than her husband, Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette, a congressman, governor, and US senator.⁷ Although *La Follette*, the first woman to graduate from the University of

²La Follette reprinted her testimony in the *La Follette’s Magazine* as “A Question of Democracy,” *LM* 5, no. 19, May 10, 1913, 6.

³Although variations on the term “feminist” (feministic, feminist, feminists) appear in *La Follette’s Magazine* as early as 1911, *La Follette* never provided her own definition of the term.

⁴Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 20.

⁵Cott, 13, 49.

⁶Dee Ann Montgomery, “An Intellectual Profile of Belle La Follette” (PhD diss, Indiana University, 1975), 225.

⁷See Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette*, 2nd ed. (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2008).

Wisconsin law school, helped to draft some of the legislation that her husband put forward, she channeled the bulk of her political energies into her work as a public speaker and journalist to become a key player in the campaigns for woman suffrage, civil rights for African Americans, and world peace and disarmament. Upon her death in 1931, the *New York Times* hailed her as “probably the least known yet most influential of all the American women who have had to do with public affairs.”⁸

Books, articles, essays, a short film, and plays, including a full-length musical, all hail Belle La Follette as the little woman behind the great man.⁹ This research adds an analysis of the contradictory nature of her support for the women’s suffrage amendment and the legacy of the wide range of arguments she proffered so successfully in support of its passage.

Pioneer Journalist

Suffragists in the Midwest “recognized the power of paper as an inexpensive means to reach isolated rural voters [and] ... planned their political campaigns around small papers with big messages.”¹⁰ Much of *La Follette’s Magazine*, founded in 1909, was penned by Belle and Bob and, later, by members of their extended family. The magazine offered a mix of homey features, farm news, recipes, fiction, and cartoons, but it was mainly a forum for progressive political views, particularly those of the La Follettes and their closest associates. The sixteen-page weekly’s circulation in its early years was relatively modest, ranging from 30,000 to 40,000. It garnered a faithful readership, however, especially the

⁸“Wisconsin’s Matriarch,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1931, 15.

⁹Belle La Follette has been the subject of considerable scholarship including two biographies: Nancy C. Unger, *Belle La Follette* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Lucy Freeman, Sherry La Follette, and George Zabriskie, *Belle* (New York: Beaufort, 1986). Additional works on Belle La Follette by Nancy C. Unger include “The Two Worlds of Belle La Follette,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 83, no. 2 (Winter 1999–2000): 82–110; “The Unexpected Belle La Follette,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 99, no. 2 (Winter 2015–2016): 16–27; “How did Belle La Follette Resist Racial Segregation in Washington DC, 1913–1914?” in *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1775–2000*, 8, no. 2, edited by Kathryn Sklar and Thomas Dublin (New York: Alexander Street Press, June 2004); “‘When Women Condemn the Whole Race’: Belle Case La Follette Attacks the Color Line,” in *Women in Print*, edited by James P. Danky and Wayne Wiegand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 281–96. Works by other authors include Dee Ann Montgomery, “An Intellectual Profile of Belle Case La Follette: Progressive Editor, Political Strategist, and Feminist” (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1975); Bernard Weisberger, *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), and “Changes and Choices: Two and a Half Generations of La Follette Women,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 76, no. 4 (1993): 248–70.

¹⁰Sara Egge, “‘Strewn Knee Deep in Literature’: A Material Analysis of Print Propaganda and Woman Suffrage,” *Agricultural History* 88, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 591.

Home and Education feature by Belle La Follette, as evidenced by the large number of letters she routinely published from her appreciative and dedicated readers.

She had been frustrated that women were generally not as interested in current events as they should be, and neglected or scorned reading newspapers.¹¹ She blamed this less on women and more on newspapers editors for insisting that the pages advertised as being of interest to women focus primarily on fashion. Exasperated, La Follette threw down the gauntlet in a 1911 article, writing: "Let's fool these men publishers and put our time on the world's events."¹² Evaluating the results, one representative reader enthused, "[Y]ou have made a woman's page interesting to intelligent folks, and that is, unfortunately, more than most of the men who edit pages for women are able to do."¹³ Hailing La Follette as "a pioneer in the establishment of a new sort of women's page," *Cincinnati Enquirer* journalist Selene Armstrong Harmon declared, "One of the cleverest and most readable pages in the country is edited by Belle Case La Follette ... She was probably the first editor of a woman's department to go on a strike against the conventional formulas for hair dye and accepted recipes for beauty ... La Follette is always independent and fearless in her expression of opinion."¹⁴

In countless columns, La Follette argued for women's suffrage on the basis of women's essential nature. She was hardly alone in downplaying or eschewing the equality of the sexes in favor of a generally more palatable, less radical rationale. Many suffrage leaders urged that women be enfranchised because they were "naturally" more moral and selfless than men, and more dedicated to the greater good. That is, women deserved the vote because of their sex, not despite it.¹⁵ According to this view, a woman's roles as homemaker and mother were her greatest political credentials. In 1917 Clara Burdette, a leading light in the women's club movement, described in the *Syracusan* alumni magazine the new role for women urban industrial society: "The woman's place is in the home," she emphasized before adding, "But today, would she serve the home, she must go beyond the home. No longer is the home encompassed by four walls. Many of its important activities lie now involved in the bigger family of the city and the state."¹⁶

¹¹BCL, "Read the News," *LM* 1, no. 32, August 14, 1909, 10.

¹²BCL, "Foolishness," *LM* 3, no. 44, November 4, 1911, 10–11.

¹³A Page of Letters, "Wise Instruction to Youth," *LM* 2, no. 13, April 2, 1910, 10.

¹⁴Selene Armstrong Harmon, "A New Sort of Women's Page," reprinted in *LM* 6, no. 24, June 13, 1914, 6–7.

¹⁵Cott, 29.

¹⁶Clara Bradley Burdette, "The College Woman and Citizenship," *The Syracusan* (June 15, 1917) 3, Box 125, file 1, Clara Burdette Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

Journalist and suffrage advocate Rheta Childe Dorr agreed, calling community “Home,” city dwellers “the Family,” and public schools “the Nursery” before concluding, “And badly do the Home and the Family and the Nursery need their mother.”¹⁷ The solution was plain to one social worker and suffrage campaigner: “Women are by nature and training, housekeepers. Let them have a hand in the city’s housekeeping, even if they introduce an occasional house-cleaning.”¹⁸ La Follette repeatedly argued that in modern times women’s suffrage was in no way a rejection of women’s domestic role. She reprinted in the *La Follette’s Magazine* articles and speeches in support of this view by a variety of experts.

Bolstering such claims, pro-suffrage cartoons and posters featured images and slogans including: “We Want the Vote to Stop the White Slave Traffic, Sweated Labor, and to Save the Children”; “Women Bring All Voters into the World: Let Women Vote”; “Women Clean the Homes: Let Them Help Clean the City”; “We Prepare Children for the World; We Ask to Prepare the World for Our Children.”¹⁹ Popular song titles included “Give the Ballot to the Mothers,” and lyrics such as:

You talk of sanitation, and temperance, and schools,
And you send your male inspectors to impose your man-made rules;
“The woman’s sphere’s the home,” you say, then prove it to our face:
“Give us the vote that we may make the home a happier place!”²⁰

La Follette had long used her columns and speeches to promote the need for women’s housekeeping skills across the full range of progressive reform movements that arose in response to Gilded Age abuses. The Progressive movement had “special significance for women and home-makers,” she proclaimed, declaring, “Politics is merely public

¹⁷Rheta Childe Dorr, *What Eight Million Women Want* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Co., 1910), 327.

¹⁸Susan Fitzgerald, “Women in the Home,” in *One Half the People*, edited by Anne Firor Scott and Andrew MacKay Scott (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 114–15.

¹⁹Various slogans can be found at <https://www.google.com/search?q=woman+suffrage+slogans&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiD2dOu15vWAhXIKWMKHWAEddkQAUCigB&biw=1292&bih=678> (accessed September 17, 2017).

²⁰See Rebecca Hazard, “Give the Ballot to the Mothers,” and Laurence Housman, “Woman This and Woman That,” circa 1911, “Songs about Women’s Rights,” Protest Song Lyrics.net, <http://www.protestsonglyrics.net/index.phtml> (accessed October 6, 2017).

housekeeping.”²¹ She claimed that women, by virtue of their nature and experience as homemakers and mothers, were better qualified than men in many important political arenas. For example, she described inexperienced men who were factory safety inspectors “going helplessly about knowing no more about ventilation, sanitation, overcrowding, and other dangers to health and life, than about dressing an infant; not a bit . . . So much for the men. Now we women, we know about ventilation, cleanliness, and sanitation, don’t we?”²² And like many women in various environmental protection movements, she argued that women were better qualified than men to conserve natural resources: “Women’s organizations have been a most potent force in the conservation movement. Its objects and ideals as they relate to the preservation of the beauty of Nature, have strong appeal to women’s aesthetic instinct.”²³

La Follette also voiced decidedly egalitarian sentiments in her demands for suffrage. She declared in 1912, “government is not a man’s problem nor a woman’s problem, but a mutual problem for men and women . . . I can think of no important subject that has occupied the attention of the congress in the last twenty years that does not affect women equally with men.”²⁴ Criticizing Theodore Roosevelt’s suggestion that, in conservative states, women vote on the issue of suffrage in a referendum, La Follette fired back, “Why deprive Dr. Anna Shaw . . . or Jane Addams the right to vote because a majority of the conservative women of a state preferred to shirk the responsibility?” The former president, she charged, failed to recognize that “men and women are equally and mutually concerned in government and it is only when they equally understand and are responsible that we shall secure a well-balanced democracy.”²⁵

La Follette railed against the “false distinctions” and “unjust discriminations” that prevented women from voting.²⁶ Women’s crucial contributions to many family incomes, she urged, were part of the reason that women’s suffrage was so necessary: “Never was mutual cooperation of men and women so important to the solution of social and labor problems as today.” Moreover, she did not report on working-class women’s struggles only from a safe distance. Despite her status as a senator’s wife, she was shoved by a policeman and told to “move on” during the Chicago garment workers’ strike in 1909.²⁷

²¹BCL, “Why the Homemaker Should Vote for La Follette,” October 17, 1924, La Follette Family Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter LFP), D-42.

²²BCL, “A True Evangelist—and an Opportunity,” *LM* 3, no. 21, May 27, 1911, 10.

²³BCL, Untitled Speech on Conservation, n.d., LFP, D-43.

²⁴BCL, “Marching in a Suffrage Parade,” *LM* 4, no. 20, May 18, 1912, 11.

²⁵BCL, “Roosevelt’s Speech on Suffrage,” *LM* 4, no. 33, August 7, 1912, 10.

²⁶“Woman Suffrage Day,” *Washington Post*, May 2, 1915, 16.

²⁷BCL, “Impression of the Garment Workers Strike,” *LM* 2, no. 45, November 12, 1910, 11.

Even as La Follette campaigned for the rights of poor women, she emphasized with equal urgency that social acceptance of paid employment for women should not be based solely on financial need. Moreover, unlike most prominent reformers of their generation, the La Follettes, who omitted the word “obey” from their marriage vows, did not believe that a life of activism precluded a woman from marriage and children. They differed from most congressional families in that they were not wealthy and had no private income. Family debt incurred by the production and mailing costs associated with spreading the progressive political message (including the publication of *La Follette’s Magazine*) fueled Belle La Follette’s willingness to take on freelance writing assignments and work the paid lecture circuit. In 1911 her series “Thought for the Day” for the North American Press Syndicate appeared in fifty-seven newspapers in more than twenty states. As a wife and the mother of four children, La Follette experienced the endless conflicts and profound rewards of combining career and family as she struggled to balance her progressive reform activities, which included paid work, with domestic obligations. She was one of the rare women of her race, class, and generation to consciously take on this double shift, and she was appalled by the lack of ambition among most congressional wives, especially their refusal to take up political activism. Her own experience confirmed her certainty that “industry, occupation, is as needful to the development of women as of men.”²⁸

La Follette’s always passionate belief in the growing desire of all women “to share in the work of the world” was reinforced in 1911 by the publication of Olive Schreiner’s feminist treatise *Woman and Labor*. La Follette compared it to “an epic poem, majestic, powerful, and thrilling.” Schreiner described women who lived empty lives and were wholly dependent on their husbands’ incomes as “parasitic,” a term La Follette would use repeatedly in her demands that women be allowed the vote to best carry out the equal opportunities and useful occupations to which all people were entitled.²⁹

Results of La Follette’s Big-Tent Approach

Conscientious, driven, and serious to the point of being virtually humorless, La Follette was nationally recognized as an ambitious and effective stump speaker for suffrage. During a twelve-day tour of Wisconsin in 1912, she spoke thirty-one times in fourteen different counties. Although La Follette tended to be self-deprecating about both her contributions and the toll this tour took on her time and energy, in a *New York Times* story headlined simply “Mrs. La Follette Is Leader,”

²⁸BCL, “Women’s Work,” *LM* 4, no. 1, January 6, 1912, 10.

²⁹*Ibid.*

she acknowledged, "I am in earnest in this campaign."³⁰ When her train was late to one county fair, the event organizer was inundated by questions about her arrival time. Despite the rain as she spoke, fair goers did not drift away. "And how they applauded!" marveled one witness.³¹ Although she campaigned heaviest in the Midwest, she was in demand as a speaker from Washington, DC, to Oregon and California. When she contracted with a lecturers' bureau for a paid speaking trip in 1914, she agreed to speak for sixty-three consecutive days across Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. Aware of La Follette's influence, Alice Paul, chair of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, asked her to encourage local suffrage organizations to send resolutions to the US Congress asking for passage of a federal (rather than state) suffrage amendment.³²

Not all were persuaded by La Follette's arguments. One man shook his fists at her mid-speech at a county fair, shouting, "Woman's place is behind the kitchen stove." When she asked if he would always have his wife behind the stove, he answered in the affirmative. Yet La Follette believed that in this exchange she had lost the battle but won the war: "His answer was more convincing to the little group who were listening than anything I could say."³³ She continued to promote county fairs as some of the richest venues for suffrage work.

La Follette's magazine articles also made an impact. When a reader from Montana requested that La Follette devote part of her column space to explanations and answers regarding political terms, speeches, and references particularly for women preparing for more engaged citizenship, La Follette replied eagerly, urging her readers to let her know of their political interests. Magazine subscribers responded enthusiastically to her call that they become engaged with the nation's problems and flooded her with queries on how to proceed. They asked her advice on topics ranging from how to organize reading clubs dedicated to women's issues to how to educate women for "intelligent" voting.³⁴ When asked by a reader to explain the meaning of initiative, referendum, and recall measures, La Follette devoted a column to defining these tools.³⁵

La Follette was particularly adept, in print and in person, at persuading women who had internalized the prescribed domestic sphere that their very essence obligated them to demand the vote to bring their

³⁰"Mrs. La Follette is Leader," *New York Times*, September 11, 1912, 6.

³¹Elizabeth Gardiner Evans, "How Voters and Future Voters Braved a Storm," *LM* 4, no. 39, September 28, 1912, 10.

³²Alice Paul to BCL, June 11, 1914, LFP, D-13

³³BCL, untitled speech to Suffrage School, n.d., LFP, D-40.

³⁴"Some Interesting Letters," *LM* 7, no. 4, April 1, 1915, 12.

³⁵BCL, "A Woman Who Wishes to Know about Politics," *LM* 3, no. 12, March 25, 1911, 10; BCL, "The Modern Town Meeting," *LM* 3, no. 27, July 8, 1911, 10.

moral influence for the betterment of not just their own homes, but all homes.³⁶ After California women won the franchise, she spoke in 1912 of their obligation to use the vote to eradicate prostitution. One woman confessed to her that she was not especially interested in voting, adding, “but what you said about women using the ballot for the protection of unfortunate girls and women makes me feel that I must help.”³⁷

Many white women who were suffrage activists resisted racial integration, either out of their own racism or for fear that it would alienate potential supporters among white voters. As Nancy Cott explained: white suffragists “caved in to the racism of the surrounding society, sacrificing democratic principle and the dignity of black people if it seemed advantageous to white women’s obtaining the vote.”³⁸ For example, when faced with Ida Wells-Barnett and other African American members of Chicago’s Alpha Suffrage Club (an organization promoting race progress as well as gender justice), white organizers of the 1913 suffrage parade in Washington, DC, insisted that the women of color march at the end of the parade rather than with the white members of the Illinois delegation. La Follette was uniquely outspoken among white suffrage advocates in her opposition to minimizing the rights of one group to enhance the rights of another.³⁹ She wrote and spoke extensively on her belief that the cause of womankind extended across race as well as class. Although she asserted that “this business of being a woman is in many ways, like being a member of a despised race,” she recognized the additional forms of oppression heaped on African Americans.⁴⁰ She used her column in 1911 to chide white middle- and upper-class women specifically for their racism, noting in particular the negative stereotypes that they perpetuated concerning their African American domestic servants.⁴¹

Throughout 1913 and 1914, even as La Follette delivered dozens of pro-suffrage articles and speeches, she also wrote and spoke extensively against the racial segregation of the civil service being implemented by the Wilson administration. Integration, she charged, was “in no way a matter of social privilege. It is a matter of civil right.”⁴² She called out racists throughout the government, including Senators Francis Newlands (D-Nevada) and James K. Vardaman (D-Mississippi), and chastised

³⁶BCL, “A Question of Democracy.”

³⁷BCL, “Notes on the Suffrage Campaign in California,” *LM* 4, no. 33, August 17, 1912, 10.

³⁸Cott, 68.

³⁹For the pervasiveness racism among white suffrage advocates, see Louise Michele Newman, *White Women’s Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For La Follette’s extraordinary contributions to the struggle for racial equality see Unger, *Belle La Follette*, 88–115.

⁴⁰BCL, “The Business of Being a Woman,” *LM* 4, no. 35, August 31, 1912, 11.

⁴¹BCL, “The Colored Folk of Washington,” *LM* 3, no. 31, August 5, 1911, 10–11.

⁴²BCL, “Color Line to Date,” *LM* 6, no. 4, January 24, 1914, 6.

every American who refused to defend equality, calling white indifference “a greater obstacle than prejudice.”⁴³ She targeted the president himself when she learned that two African American employees of long standing in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing were fired after granting her an interview. She embarked on a lengthy (but ultimately unsuccessful) campaign to have the employees reinstated, reprinting in *La Follette’s* statements from the employees as well as the responses from Treasury Secretary William McAdoo (Wilson’s son-in-law) and, ultimately, the president himself.⁴⁴

La Follette’s passionate defense of racial equality earned her attention in mainstream newspapers throughout the country. Following her electrifying speech on January 4, 1914, at the “colored” YMCA in the nation’s capital, for example, the *Washington Post’s* front page carried the headline “She Defends Negroes—Wife of Senator La Follette Denounces Segregation—Says US Government Errs.”⁴⁵ One anonymous letter warned her that “for a white lady to address a Negro Audience is out of place,” warning, “it does not raise you very much in the estimation of decent white people.” Another termed La Follette “disgraceful to the white race” and suggested that the only true reason she might have written such a column was that she was herself black—but only “a little light in color.” It was signed, “[A] real white person with no black stripes down the back like you.”⁴⁶

In Washington, DC, African American activist Nannie Helen Burroughs introduced La Follette to a primarily black audience as “the successor of Harriet Beecher Stowe.” In that audience was attorney James H. Hayes, who wrote to La Follette that he spoke for his race when he told her, “We thank God for such a *white* woman as you. We thank God for sending you to us and we thank you for coming. A few more like you would awaken the sleeping conscience of the nation.”⁴⁷

Steadfastly refusing to conflate “different” with “inferior,” La Follette’s egalitarianism was genuine, a product of her upbringing, reinforced by her education at the University of Wisconsin. She spoke passionately on behalf of a number of groups often reviled by even her fellow progressives. She defended the equality of people who were not middle-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants not because she believed they had the potential to assimilate: she found value in who they were rather than who they might become. She invited her readers to consider

⁴³Ibid.; BCL to Mr. Patterson, January 28, 1914, LFP, D-25.

⁴⁴BCL, “The Color Line,” *LM* 5, no. 34, August 23, 1913, 6; “Miss Murray’s Dismissal,” *LM* 5, no. 35, August 30, 1913, 6; “The Adverse Point of View on ‘The Color Line,’” *LM* 5, no. 37, September 13, 1913, 6.

⁴⁵“She Defends Negroes,” *Washington Post*, January 5, 1914, 1.

⁴⁶BCL, “Color Line to Date,” 7.

⁴⁷James Hayes to BCL, February 18, 1914, LFP, D-13.

whether immigrants, “with their older civilizations ... do not bring some standards that it would be well for us to adopt rather than displace.” She urged that “Instead of the assumption of superiority on our part and limitation on theirs, there should be greater mutual respect and teachability.”⁴⁸

Early Storm Clouds

La Follette’s firm conviction that people could be different and equal left her furious when critics charged that her arguments that women were qualified to vote by the very essence of their female nature, as well as by their complete equality with men, were mutually exclusive. Although she ruefully admitted, “The man who said women ought not to vote as long as they cannot fasten their own gowns made the best anti-suffrage argument I have ever heard,” she used the pages of her magazine to discredit all arguments that “the assumption that the right to vote detracts in the smallest degree from the sanctity or the ennobling influence of the home.”⁴⁹ She was particularly incensed when women claimed “Mothers can’t be mothers if they vote”: “It is the most trying thing in the world to hear a clever, gifted, persuasive woman present these objections.”⁵⁰

She responded by taking part in a series of debates staged at county fairs with Ohio journalist and anti-suffrage activist Lucy Price. To Price’s insinuation that women could not both vote and retain their femininity, La Follette countered that in states where women had been granted suffrage, “they are just as good mothers and homemakers, just as ladylike ... and ... have not lost one single grace or charm on account of the vote.” She pointed to herself as proof that “there is no inconsistency in being a good housekeeper ... and taking an interest in public affairs.”⁵¹

La Follette dismissed the early warning signs that the domestic rationale for suffrage could be used to limit as well as expand women’s rights. The 1908 landmark case *Muller v. Oregon* had already revealed the dangers of gains that had been won for women on the basis of their differences from men, differences that included physiology and reproductive functions. In *Muller* the court asserted plainly that women are not equal to men but, like children, are physically weaker and incapable

⁴⁸BCL, “What Standards Shall We Fix?” *LM* 4, no. 12, March 23, 1912, 10–11.

⁴⁹See BCL, “Thoughts about Clothes,” *LM* 3, no. 41, October 13, 1911, 10; H. M. Chittenden, “Women’s Part in Government,” *LM* 4, no. 42, October 19, 1912, 7.

⁵⁰“Notes on Miss Price’s argument before the Law Students of Western Reserve University,” circa 1914, LFP, D-36; BCL to Anna Cadogan Etz, November 9, 1914, D-25, 2.

⁵¹BCL, Untitled Suffrage Debate, 1914, LFP, D-41, rebuttal section, 2–3.

of protecting their own rights and therefore must rely on the state to look out for them.⁵² Yet La Follette scoffed at concerns about conceding women's inferiority to gain protective legislation. She believed that laws limiting working hours exclusively for women were secured because that was the only way to get conservative state courts to hold any limits constitutional.⁵³ Laws protecting women, she proclaimed, were simply the opening wedge; laws limiting men's working hours would soon follow.⁵⁴

Scholar Sara Egge and others argue that women suffrage advocates led by Carrie Chapman Catt shrewdly capitalized on the view of women as support staff to fathers, husbands, children, and society at large. As the United States slid toward war, many suffrage advocates presented women as dutiful and devoted patriotic citizens carrying out vital civic responsibilities. Because women were understood to be naturally moral and selfless, their support for the war through a variety of home-front activities (Council of National Defense, food conservation programs, the American Red Cross) validated President Wilson's eventual claims that the nation's war aims (including making the world safe for democracy) were entirely noble and altruistic. Wilson's decision to tap both Catt and National American Woman Suffrage Association president Anna Howard Shaw for the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense in 1917 established clear connections between essentialist arguments, woman suffrage, and the war.⁵⁵

Women pacifists were appalled: 3,000 of them, including La Follette, had met in 1915 to form the Women's Peace Party (WPP), which became the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Although La Follette declined to chair the national board in 1921, she remained a board member and one of the organization's most dedicated advocates. Members of the WPP used a variety of arguments to present all wars as senseless, which led their critics to dismiss them as sentimental, outdated, and unrealistic. Many of La Follette's most compelling arguments against war, embraced by the WPP, therefore targeted current conflicts and were based on entirely practical economics and politics terms: "[I]n this age of communication and interlocking interests ... modern international war is utterly and absolutely futile."⁵⁶ Yet La Follette repeatedly cited women's nature as their greatest credential in their noble quest to replace war with international tribunals. Her opposition to all war, she argued, was "typical of that of vast numbers of American women today[:] women have had from childhood an

⁵²See Nancy Woloch, *Muller v. Oregon* (Boston: Bedford, 1996).

⁵³BCL, Untitled Suffrage debate, 1914, LFP, D-41.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵See Sara Egge, *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

⁵⁶BCL, Boston Peace Day Speech, 18 May 1915, LFP, D-44, 11.

instinctive revulsion against war and all its attendant horrors; women have a humanitarian faith in peace.”⁵⁷ In the end, she insisted, “It is because... mother[s] and teachers in this country so largely direct the education of youth, that so great an obligation for permanent peace rests on them.”⁵⁸

Although a number of states (primarily in the West) enfranchised women, a federal suffrage amendment remained stubbornly out of reach. The signature phrase in Wilson’s stirring call to Congress on April 1, 1917, for American entry into war was: “The world must be made safe for democracy.” Woman suffrage advocates, including the leadership of the National Woman’s Party (NWP), immediately pointed to the hypocrisy of a nation fighting for the rights of people abroad while denying it to women at home. “President Wilson is deceiving the world when he appears the prophet of democracy... [T]he world will find him out,” charged an enormous banner held aloft at the White House gates.⁵⁹ Wilson, bowing to political expediency, announced on the floor of the US Senate his support for women’s suffrage as a war measure on January 9, 1918. The president asked the Senate to support the suffrage amendment, declaring women’s vote “vitally essential to the successful prosecution of this great war of humanity.” He cited both the contributions women had made to the war effort and the need to demonstrate to the world “that democracy means that women shall play their part in affairs alongside men and upon an equal footing with them.”⁶⁰ When the Senate finally approved the Nineteenth Amendment on June 4, 1919, La Follette, present in the chamber, ignored the role of women’s support for the war in this achievement, choosing instead to credit and celebrate the more longstanding big-tent combination of egalitarianism and essentialism.⁶¹

A Mixed Legacy of a Mixed Campaign

According to Nancy Cott, “The unspoken notion that adding women to the electorate should have transformed politics was... at the heart of some suffragists’ disappointment in the 1920s.”⁶² La Follette claimed to harbor no such illusions. She had consistently cautioned that women’s

⁵⁷Ibid., 1.

⁵⁸Ibid., 3, 13.

⁵⁹Bernadette Cahill, *Alice Paul, the National Woman’s Party, and the Vote* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 156.

⁶⁰Woodrow Wilson: “Address to the Senate on the Nineteenth Amendment,” September 30, 1918. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=126468> (accessed January 6, 2018).

⁶¹BCL to family, February 16, 1919, LFP, A-24.

⁶²Cott, 101.

suffrage would not immediately solve the political problems that had long plagued the country.⁶³ But she also noted confidently that the states that had already granted suffrage “on the average, are more responsive to the enactment of laws for social, civic, and economic betterment as, for example, child labor, juvenile courts, pure food, minimum wage, conservation and kindred legislation.” Woman suffrage on the national scale, she predicted, would cause all political parties to “vie with each other in the adoption of platform planks that will appeal to the humanitarian ideals of women.”⁶⁴ Once the Nineteenth Amendment passed, she was confident that voting women shared a “sense of real equality and genuine democracy,” even as she reaffirmed aspects of essentialism: “I am thrilled to find women imbued at the very beginning with the feeling that their interest in politics must be permanent and continuous and personally unselfish. The feeling appears instinctive.”⁶⁵

“Our dreams [have] come true,” La Follette crowed.⁶⁶ The widespread horror at the waste and bloodshed that defined World War I bolstered her assurance that women could now lead the way to a permanent peace through international organization and disarmament: “I believe the newly enfranchised women of the world are destined and equipped to take the initiative and to exercise the balance of power in determining this issue of such tremendous importance to the progress of humanity.”⁶⁷ The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom would lead the way.

La Follette viewed the postwar efforts to quickly build the nation’s military as the kind of emotional reaction that men usually attributed to women: the nation was “suffering from a kind of nervous hysteria and panic ... Fear, unreasoning fear, dominated the world. And rival armaments—big armies and navies—are the offspring of fear, unreasoning fear.”⁶⁸ “Are not all women anxious to prevent war?,” she asked rhetorically in 1920.⁶⁹ And as a member of the Women’s Peace Society, she proclaimed in a speech in Washington on Christmas Day, 1920, “We women have the power to compel disarmament.”⁷⁰ She credited the defeat of the bill compelling military training for American youth to the efforts of women, and she saw their victory as a sign of the building

⁶³BCL, Untitled suffrage speech, 4.

⁶⁴BCL, “Women Voters and the Packers,” *LM* 12, no. 3, March 1, 1920, 45.

⁶⁵BCL, “An Inspiring Campaign”; “Wisconsin League of Progressive Women,” *LM* 12, no. 11, November 1, 1920, 168.

⁶⁶BCL, “Woman Suffrage a Success,” *LM* 16, no. 9, September 1924, 138.

⁶⁷BCL, “Women and War,” undated, LFP, D-41, 14.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁹BCL, “Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom,” *LM* 12, no. 10, October 1, 1920, 155; “Mrs. La Follette Urges US Women to Fight Armaments,” [Madison, WI] *Capital Times*, December 27, 1920, 1.

⁷⁰“Mrs. La Follette Urges.”

momentum of their power. As with the case for suffrage, her peace leadership led women from across the nation to pledge their support.⁷¹ In her capacity as chair of the advisory committee to the Wisconsin Women's Progressive Association, she toured fourteen cities urging voters to reject any candidate not committed to the reduction of preparedness and arms. Her audiences were so large and enthusiastic in the state that had recently vilified her entire family for opposing American entry into World War I that she imagined "an irresistible tide of feeling might ultimately prevail against the preparation for war akin to that against slavery—a rising tide that would not tolerate evil."⁷²

She was therefore bitterly disappointed when women, who had been so active in the immediate postwar disarmament campaigns, were not represented at the Washington Naval Conference in 1921. Although she welcomed the conference, which resulted in the Five Power Treaty mandating arms reduction as an initial step in the struggle for a new order, in the end she concluded that statesmen were too mired in traditional ideas about war to listen to women. In 1927, La Follette once again advised women to take the big-tent approach: "[I]n matters of such universal concern [as world peace] we must use all sorts of methods and arguments just as we did in suffrage to appeal to all sorts of people."⁷³ She not did not live to see World War II reveal the deep flaws of her assumption that women would use their inherent morality as part of a multi-pronged, united effort to stop the next war.

La Follette and others ultimately found that the unresolved questions concerning inherent and perceived differences between men and women continued to impact the fight for equality. She steadfastly refused to conflate "protection" with "privilege" or "different" with "inferior." She believed that one could work to remedy problems that plagued women specifically without conceding their inequality. She faced, however, a growing consensus that women could have equal rights or protective legislation, but not both.

In 1921, La Follette attended the NWP annual convention, recording her impressions in *La Follette's Magazine*. Anticipating tremendous support for the causes of peace and disarmament, she was deeply disappointed when NWP leader Alice Paul sought to use the occasion to bring to fruition only the demands set forth in the Seneca Falls Women's Bill of Rights: equality with men. Although Paul failed to define precisely what she meant by equality, what was clear was that she viewed efforts

⁷¹See "Unite to Fight War," *LM* 12, no. 12, December 1, 1920, 184; BCL, untitled article, *LM* 12, no. 5, May 1, 1920, 81; "Start a Peace Circle," *LM* 7, no. 5, May 1, 1915, 10; BCL to Anita Koenen, August 30, 1921, LFP, D-26.

⁷²BCL, "A Week in Wisconsin," *LM* 13, no. 11, November 1, 1921, 170.

⁷³BCL to Gwyneth Roe, December 1, 1927, LFP, D-27; BCL, "W.I.L. Congress," *LM* 16, no. 5, May 1, 1924, 74.

to resolve specific problems, such as those plaguing working women and women of color, to be a distraction, as were women's campaigns for world peace. The resolution demanding the enforcement of the Nineteenth Amendment "to ensure the vote of the colored women of the South" was defeated, La Follette reported dejectedly. Moreover, she added, "Resolutions to rewrite marriage and divorce laws, inheritance laws, guardianship laws, sex laws, on the basis of equal rights, standards, and responsibilities; to repeal laws denying scientific information concerning parenthood; to establish motherhood endowment; to make home-making women partners in the family income were voted down."⁷⁴

Paul and the NWP ultimately came to promote as their sole goal an equal rights amendment to the Constitution: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." The simple language was intended to make equal rights a single-issue goal, and thereby avoid privileging some forms of discrimination over others. Paul insisted that her method would give "working women the same chance in industry as the working men," for it would base "labor legislation upon the job, and not the sex of the worker."⁷⁵ Achieving equal rights, according to Paul, would bring not just legal rights but economic parity and social justice. Appalled by this single-minded solution to such complex problems, La Follette continued to refuse to approve the promotion of one agenda to the exclusion of all others, particularly protective legislation. She was proud in 1921 when Wisconsin became the first state to pass an equal rights bill. She had championed this legislation granting women full equality with men under civil law except where it would deny women the protections and privileges necessary for the general welfare. Many shared her belief that "the greatest good for the greatest number was served by protection laws."⁷⁶

La Follette quickly grew frustrated as the exemption language was used to chip away the legal equality of the sexes, fueling the growing consensus that equal rights and protective legislation were mutually exclusive. Alice Paul, for example, stated plainly, "I think that enacting labor laws along sex lines is erecting another handicap for women in the economic struggle."⁷⁷ Sex-based protective legislation, in this view, "was an anachronism, an artifact of women's long history of economic independence."⁷⁸ La Follette triumphantly reported in the magazine that

⁷⁴BCL, "National Convention of the National Woman's Party," *LM* 13, no. 3, March 1, 1921, 42–43.

⁷⁵Alice Paul, quoted in Christine Lunardini, *Alice Paul* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), 154.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 127.

⁷⁷Alice Paul, quoted in Cott, 122.

⁷⁸Cott, 125.

equal suffrage was helping to bring equal pay for equal work.⁷⁹ However, her confidence that the *Muller* decision was simply the opening wedge to be followed relatively quickly by legal limits to the hours of all workers was not realized. Although the Oregon statute upheld in *Muller* and other protective legislation were not without redeeming features and consequences that benefited working women, over the course of the next 100 years, many women were “protected” right out of their jobs by legislation and labor practices designed to shield women. For example, even as messages such as the now iconic “We can do it!” Rosie the Riveter poster urged women to take on factory jobs to support the World War II effort, the Bureau of Labor Standards of the US Department of Labor recommended a maximum lifting weight of fifty pounds for men and twenty-five pounds for women.⁸⁰ For the next twenty-five years, this arbitrary limit—based on sex, regardless of individual strength and ability—disqualified women from many factory jobs, relegating them to lower-paying, non-union jobs. It also disqualified women from many government positions such as postal carrier.

Conclusions

Belle La Follette successfully used both feminist assertions and essentialist constructions of womanhood to bring support to the suffrage cause. But the two approaches were frequently at loggerheads, dividing women and hindering their progress. Women who were confident that it was their maternal, feminine nature that qualified them to vote pursued very different agendas than women who believed in women’s political, economic, and social equality with men. Not surprisingly, decades separated women getting the vote and the rise of the modern women’s liberation movement. Cott concludes, “The unfulfilled agenda of 1910s Feminism carrying over the decades made a subsequent mass women’s movement necessary as much as it made it possible.”⁸¹ The legal arguments codifying women’s inferiority and rightful dependence on men dismissed by La Follette as merely expedient and temporary stretched from *Muller* in 1908 until the 1960s and beyond. In *Hoyt v. Florida*, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in 1961 that women, the center of home and family, were not required to serve on juries. Their exclusion from this obligation of citizenship, according to the Court, also protected

⁷⁹The Woman’s Bulletin, “Some of the Results of Two Years of Equal Suffrage in California,” *LM* 6, no. 10, March 7, 1914, 6.

⁸⁰Jason T. English and Gary S. Nelson, “Manual Lifting: Historical Sources of Current Standards Regarding Acceptable Weights of Lift,” *Nelson & Associates*, <http://www.hazardcontrol.com/factsheets/ml-mh/evolution-of-manual-lifting-standards> (accessed October 8, 2017).

⁸¹Cott, 282.

women “from the filth, obscenity, and obnoxious atmosphere” of the courtroom.⁸²

Many educational opportunities and professions remained essentially closed to women. Until the Equal Credit Opportunity act of 1974, banks could refuse to issue a credit card to an unmarried woman—and could require that a married woman’s husband cosign. Only the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 ended the practice of firing women when they became pregnant. Marital rape was not recognized until the 1970s, and it was not criminalized in all states until 1993. Equal pay for equal work has yet to be achieved.

The far-reaching friction between essentialism and feminism had profound social, political, and economic as well as legal consequences. The list of inequalities, *de jure* and *de facto*, is long, lasting for decades and ranging from reproductive rights to women’s roles in the military. During the Great Depression, many women, including those who were self-supporting, and even some who provided the sole support for their families, were fired from their jobs to make way for men, who were deemed the natural breadwinners and therefore considered more deserving of the few jobs available. New Deal projects and assistance also favored men.⁸³

The strength of the widespread conviction that women’s only true place is in the home was brought into sharp focus after the United States entered World War II. Although a massive propaganda campaign convinced some six million women to take on paid work for the first time, even at the height of the war only 37 percent of all adult women were employed.⁸⁴ Despite pointed assurances in posters and women’s magazines that women working in war industries could be good mothers, only 12.1 percent of mothers with children under the age of ten were engaged in paid employment, an increase of a mere 4.3 percent.⁸⁵ Moreover, women’s wages remained far lower than men’s for comparable work.⁸⁶

Following the war, a whole new barrage of messages worked to confirm and refresh essentialist prescriptions and beliefs. In the 1947 best-seller *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, a male sociologist and a female psychiatrist detailed the long list of tragedies certain to befall women who voluntarily (i.e., not out of financial necessity) attempted to combine

⁸²Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999) 181, 357.

⁸³“Working Women in the 1930s,” *American Decades vol. 4: 1930–1939*, Judith S. Baughman et al., eds., Gale, 2001. US History in Context, link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3468301237/UHIC?u=sand55832&xid=4a83ab53 (accessed October 3, 2017).

⁸⁴Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), cited in “Women Workers in World War II,” Metropolitan State University of Denver, <https://msudenver.edu/camphale/thewomensarmycorps/womenwwii/> (accessed October 5, 2017).

⁸⁵Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

paid work with raising a family, including loss of femininity, neglected children, resentful husbands, sexual frustration, discontent, and, ultimately, divorce and supreme unhappiness.⁸⁷ Even many women forced by financial necessity to work outside the home suffered from guilt fostered by experts' assertions that their children were damaged by the absence of a full-time mother. Other women, privileged enough to have husbands who provided the family's sole financial support, stifled a vague but disturbing awareness of the profound limits to their roles and opportunities, a lack of fulfillment that Betty Friedan ultimately dubbed "The Feminine Mystique" in 1963.

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s showed that the two forces that La Follette had gathered together under a big tent had become diametrically opposed. Feminists determined to complete the crusade begun by Alice Paul's forces to achieve equal rights for women once and for all through passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) again met opposition fired by essentialist arguments. Phyllis Schlafly successfully led the "Stop ERA" campaign by turning it into "a war among women over gender roles."⁸⁸ Once again, even women who rejected the essentialist arguments that relegated women to support staff were concerned that enforcers of the ERA would not make the distinction between "equal" and "same," and could therefore damage hard-fought gains in legal protections for women.⁸⁹ They echoed the charges raised in the 1920s that "over-articulate theorists were attempting to solve the working women's problems on a purely feminist basis with the working women's own voice far less adequately heard."⁹⁰

Not only did women repeatedly come into conflict during efforts to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, but their differences continue to plague women's unity to the present day in skirmishes carried out on a number of political, social, and cultural battlefields. Within ecofeminist movements, for example, some activists profess that all women, especially mothers, are the natural guardians of "Mother Earth." Others argue that women and nature are mutually associated and devalued in Western culture, and it is this tradition of oppression that uniquely qualifies women to understand and empathize with the Earth's plight and to

⁸⁷Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 232–41.

⁸⁸Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 147.

⁸⁹See Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Marjorie J. Spruill, *Divided We Stand* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); Jessica Neuwirth, *Equal Means Equal* (New York: New Press, 2015); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

⁹⁰Mary Anderson, quoted in Cott, 135.

distribute more fairly its resources.⁹¹ Although the “Mommy Wars,” which allegedly pitted full-time mothers against mothers who chose to work outside the home, were overblown, tensions over who decides what makes a good mother, and a good woman, remain.⁹²

Moreover, as in La Follette’s day, the unique problems and barriers faced by poor women and women of color were for too long ignored, or poorly understood, by many white feminists.⁹³ Throughout the women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of groups outside the mainstream, including women of color and lesbians, expressed frustration at the many ways they were excluded or overlooked by women professing to care deeply about universal sisterhood. In 1981 Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua’s edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back* called considerable attention to the intersectionalities of race, class, gender, and sexualities, setting off a new wave of more inclusive and nuanced scholarship and activism. Moreover, the progressive message sent by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that separate is inherently unequal became increasingly accepted in the following decades, helping to discredit those who agreed with La Follette that “different” was not the same as “inferior.” Asserting women’s differences from men fueled fears that such recognition led women down a slippery slope ending with acknowledgment of their inequality.

La Follette’s emphasis in her speeches and writings, and especially in her *La Follette’s Magazine* columns, on racial equality, concerns for working-class women, and the potential power of international unity among women made her big tent even larger than most. In 1930, the National League of Women Voters included La Follette among the seventy-one women they honored for their service to the League and to the American Woman Suffrage Association. Nevertheless, while the wide-ranging arguments used by Belle La Follette and others helped to make the Nineteenth Amendment a reality, they also reinforced lasting cultural, political, economic, ideological, and social differences between the sexes and among women. This polarization is particularly damaging because it has allowed some of the most powerful and constructive elements of La Follette’s message to be lost: her insistence that difference is not synonymous with inferiority (especially concerning reproduction and other factors based in physiology) and her support for the sisterhood of all women across race, class, and geographic borders.

⁹¹See Nancy C. Unger, *Beyond Nature’s Housekeepers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 169–70.

⁹²See Miriam Peskowitz, *The Truth behind the Mommy Wars* (Berkeley: Seal Press 2005); Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth* (Berkeley: Free Press, 2005).

⁹³See *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, 4th ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).