

## ISSUE NO. 5

## Hashtag Feminism, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and the Other #FemFuture

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([http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada\\_Twitter.png](http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada_Twitter.png))

*Hashtag feminism makes visible what was never truly invisible, but what people refuse to see.*

– Sarah Kendzior, *Blame it on the Internet*

*Perhaps a feminism that has not responded to the needs of its constituents needs to die.*

– Rebecca Walker, *Feminist infighting*

On August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen trended worldwide. In four short days, it was tweeted over 75,465 times (Topsy 2015). Coined by Mikki Kendall (@Karynthia) during a Twitter debate about the downfall of prominent white male feminist Hugo Schwyzer (4<sup>th</sup> Wave Feminist 2013; Al Jazeera 2013b; Anderson 2013; Dzodan 2013a; Dzodan 2013c; Grace 2012; Grenoble 2013; James 2013; Mamzelle 2013; Rawls 2013b; Trudy, 2013a; Vazquez, 2013; Vingiano and Testa, 2013; White Feminist Collection Agency, 2013), the hashtag called out “digital feminists” like *Feministe’s* Jill Filipovic, *Jezebel’s* Jessica Coen, Jessica Valenti (formerly of *Feministing*), and *Slate’s* Amanda Marcotte for providing Schwyzer a platform which he “confessed, was based partly on putting down women of color and defending white feminism” (Kendall 2013b). It was also meant as a stinging rebuke to American feminism’s brand of solidarity, one which “centers on the safety and comfort of white women” at the expense of women of color (Kendall 2013b). The hashtag quickly morphed from an insular discussion about Schwyzer, his white feminist defenders, and how they collectively antagonized and alienated a coterie of WOC feminist bloggers and writers (Aura Bogado, blackamazon, brownfemipower, Flavia Dzodan, and Mikki Kendall), to an impassioned debate about the continued exclusion of nonwhite women from

mainstream feminism (Al Jazeera 2013b; The Daily Mail 2013; Plank 2013). In “The Discomfort of #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen,” Mandy Van Deven opines that

*white feminists have yet to internalize the seminal theories contained in works like The Combahee River Collective Statement, This Bridge Called My Back, and the INCITE! anthologies. [This] refusal to accept the perspectives of women of color regarding our shared history means white women continue to resist, dismiss, and ignore the same critiques when they are made today. (Van Deven 2013)*

Is mainstream feminism destined to remain the terrain of white women? Or can the digital media praxis of women of color, their hashtag feminism and tumblr activism, their blogging and livejournaling, broaden and radically redefine the very field of feminism? As I type these words, women of color are congregating in Google Hangouts and Skype, on Twitter and Tumblr. Jamie Nesbitt Golden testifies to the critical importance of social media to WOC feminist praxis:

*We share frustrations, triumphs and failures. Many of us have been fans of each other for years but have never met face-to-face. We create our own safe spaces when the safe spaces created by others fail. We mount up against Internet trolls, lend emotional support, and publicize people and projects generally overlooked by popular feminist outlets. Social media has made it possible for black feminists in Johannesburg to connect with black feminists in St. Louis and all points in between. Blogs written by women of color from one side of the globe become topics of discussion on the other side in a matter of minutes. (2013b)*

Social media has made it possible for women of color to speak to each other across borders and boundaries. I would like to utilize the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag and the subsequent aftermath to consider the perils and promise of Twitter, Tumblr, and other social media platforms for (re)forming mainstream American feminism. By delving into the discourses generated by the key participants in #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen debate via their tweets, posts, and social media statements, I hope to reveal how this contemporary discussion tragically replicates the failures of previous feminist waves. I will then consider how hashtag feminism implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – challenges the Digital Feminism articulated by Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti in the 2013 report entitled *#FemFuture: Online Revolution* (2013a). For it was the impassioned online discussions around #FemFuture in April, that first revealed the long-standing fissures in the American feminist movement. Finally, I will consider the growing white feminist backlash to WOC-led

twitter campaigns. But before I go any further, it is important to historically situate these debates.

Since the beginning of what has come to be known as second wave feminism, US women of color have questioned the racial myopia of US white women and its insistence on organizing along the binary gender division male/female alone (Sandoval 2000, 44). US feminists of color have long understood that race, culture, sex, or class can deny one “comfortable or easy access to any legitimized gender category, that the interactions between such social classifications produce other, unnamed gender forms within the social hierarchy” (Sandoval 2000, 44). In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval meticulously documents the emergence of what she calls US Third World Feminism:

*These signs of a lived experience of difference from white female experience in the United States appear repeatedly throughout 1980s U.S. third world feminist writings. Such expressions imply the existence of at least one other category of gender, reflected in the very titles of books written by U.S. feminists of color during that period. All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave (1982); and This Bridge Called My Back (1981) indicate that feminists of color exist in the interstices between normalized social categories. This in-between space, this third gender category, is also recognized in the early writings of such well-known authors as Maxine Hong Kingston, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Cherie Moraga, all of whom argued that an eccentric coalition of U.S. third world feminists is composed of “different kinds of humans,” new “mestizas,” “Woman Warriors” who live and are gendered, sexed, raced, and classed “between and among” the lines. These “sister outsiders” (1984), it was argued, inhabit an uncharted psychic terrain that Anzaldúa in 1987 named “the Borderlands,” “La Nueva Frontera.” (45)*

Despite the powerful protests and potent writings produced by feminists of color, racism was never successfully integrated into feminist theory and practice (Sandoval 2000, 49). The feminist movement’s inability to honestly reckon with the challenges lodged by U.S. feminists of color indicates a “structural deficiency within feminist praxis” (Sandoval 2000, 49). In her classic 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of anti-discrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and anti-racist politics,” Kimberlé Crenshaw affirmed that these structural deficits remain and that it seems that

*contemporary white feminists inherit not the legacy of [Sojourner] Truth's challenge to patriarchy but, instead, Truth's challenge to their forbears (Ain't I a Woman?). Even today, the difficulty that white women have traditionally experienced in sacrificing racial privilege to strengthen feminism renders them susceptible to Truth's critical question. When feminist theory and politics that claim to reflect women's experience and women's aspirations do not include or speak to black women, black women must ask: 'Ain't We Women?' If this is so, how can the claims that 'women are', 'women believe' and 'women need' be made when such claims are inapplicable or unresponsive to the needs, interests and experiences of black women? (2011a, 33)*

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen “inadvertently granted women of color permission to express the pain of being silenced and ignored and dismissed, of being relegated to a footnote in a movement that promised sisterhood” (Vazquez 2013). *XO Jane's* Lauren Walker poetically lamented, “Solidarity is for white women when the contributions of women of color to feminism's founding are completely ignored. Solidarity is for white women when your very existence is considered a dividing force. Solidarity is for white women when this discussion is still happening, centuries later” (2013). Admittedly, this is a not a new problem but one embedded in the foundations of American feminism. Since its inception, “white feminism has argued that gender should trump race... That rhetoric not only erases the experiences of women of color, but also alienates many from a movement that claims to want equality for all” (Kendall 2013b). The hashtag “vividly illustrated the ways in which white women shut out, silence and ignore women of color, intentionally and accidentally” (Clayton 2013). It allowed women of color to decry how white feminist voices still dominate the public/digital sphere, how their “voices take over the conversation and articulate struggles that are selective and often patronizing” (Malik 2013).



([http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada\\_Twitter2.png](http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada_Twitter2.png)) #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen resonated with Tina Vazquez because it encapsulated her frustration with white feminists “who want to talk for us, but not listen to us” (2013). In her view, “Mainstream feminism has been showing women of color who they are for years and for many, the

message was clear: sisterhood—as defined as ‘bonded in solidarity’—is bullshit” (Vazquez 2013).

Some feminists, however, were troubled by the sweeping generalizations and false binaries the hashtag created (Brittos 2013, Gay 2013, and Matthews 2013). Gay maintains that #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen encourages us to see all white feminists as racist and women of color as traitors to feminism (2013). It also erases the feminists of color active in digital feminist communities (Samhita Mukhopadhyay, Anna Holmes, Daisy Hernandez, Rinku Sen, Latoya Peterson, Carmen Van Kerckhove, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, Mia McKenzie and many others) (Gay 2013). Filthy Freedom’s Lindsey Yoo calls on us to rethink the way the term “women of color” operates in these hashtag debates (2013). Too often the “struggles of Asian, Latina and other women who fall outside the black-white binary” are excluded from discussion (Yoo 2013). Daniela Ramirez also takes issue with the lumping together of women of color because it flattens critical differences and creates a “myth of representation” (2013). She wonders: “If the only thing that unites us is our exclusion from the mainstream movement (and our justified opposition to that exclusion) we do not have solidarity either. When we don’t recognize that even our own practices can be essentialist and exclusionary, we cannot claim that we are doing solidarity, intersectionality, or even feminism better” (Ramirez 2013). It is worth remembering Kimberlé Crenshaw’s injunction that “intersectionality applies to everyone – no one exists outside of the matrix of power, but the implications of this matrix – when certain features are activated and relevant and when they are not – are contextual. Intersectionality represents a structural and dynamic arrangement; power marks these relationships among and between categories of experience that vary in their complexity” (2011b, 230)

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen started a critical discussion about who and who isn’t included in white and WOC feminisms. For Mikki Kendall, the most important question remains unanswered: “whether or not feminism will be receptive to the critiquing and to doing the work required to resolve the problems” (2013b). Jill Filipovic, one of the digital feminists implicated in the Hugo Schwyzer debacle, penned a seemingly heartfelt apology (2013). And during an appearance on NPR to discuss the racism of the contemporary feminist movement, she confessed: “We all ostensibly know that the centering of white middle-class heterosexual women’s interests is a reality and a problem. Yet the response to it, particularly from white feminists, is largely performative. It’s the ability to use the right academic lingo in feminist spaces, to declare your dedication to intersectionality, to be the first to point out when you think

some other white feminist is doing it wrong. What actually needs to change, as you say, is who has a seat at the table” (Demby 2013a). Unfortunately, based on Filipovic’s enthusiastic endorsement of Michelle Goldberg’s recent piece on hashtag feminism (“Feminism’s Toxic Twitter Wars”), it seems that she is only willing to allow WOC a seat at the feminist table if they temper their criticisms. Goldberg’s piece, which I will discuss more later, personally calls out Mikki Kendall and chastises the critics of the #FemFuture report. This may not be performative feminism, but it is certainly perfunctory.



([http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada\\_Twitter3.png](http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada_Twitter3.png))

As for Kendall, she is convinced that “Twitter is changing everything. Now, people are forced to hear us and women of color no longer need the platform of white feminism because they have their own microphones” (quoted in Vazquez 2013). Since the viral success of #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, Kendall and other feminists of color have crafted popular and intersectional Twitter hashtags that illuminate issues that the mainstream feminist movement has not properly addressed: poverty (#EconomicViolence), racial and sexual stereotypes (#NotYourAsianSidekick), cultural invisibility of Latin@s (#SecretLivesofFeministas), Black sexism (#BlackPowerIsForBlackMen), media bias (#NotYourNarrative), the sexual exploitation of black girls (#FastTailedGirls), and the erasure of trans women (#GirlsLikeUs). In many ways, these hashtags are a direct indictment of the parochial vision of online feminism articulated in the #FemFuture report.

### **Beyond #FemFuture: Towards a Coalitional Feminism**

*White women used to simply and straightforwardly ignore difference. In their theorizing, they used to speak as if all women as women were the same. Now they recognize the problem of difference. Whether they recognize difference is another matter.*

— Maria Lugones

*There is a dangerous ignorance in assuming #FemFuture is a first, a start, or new.*

— Jessica Marie Johnson,



([http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada\\_Twitter4.png](http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada_Twitter4.png))

In the spring of 2012, Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti partnered with the Barnard Center for Research and Women to convene “a powerful group of bloggers, online organizers, and feminist educators in a proactive, inspired spirit of collaboration to look at what the field of online feminism is and what it could be” (2013b). Based on this meeting, Martin and Valenti authored a report in which they offered a “compelling vision to make the landscape of feminist writers and activists online stronger; to create a sustainable force that would build on existing alliances among feminist movements and between online feminists and their institutional counterparts; and to develop an infrastructure of support for these important voices” (BCRW 2013). In April 2013, they posted this report online as a PDF.

Critique of the report was instantaneous and relentless (Arreola 2013; Dzodan 2013b; Factora-Borchers in Mirk 2013; Luther 2013; McEwan 2013; Rawls 2013a;) Utilizing the #FemFuture hashtag, bloggers, activists, educators, and organizers took the participants and the report to task for what appears to be U.S.-centric, mainstream, feminist elitism and historical erasure of radical women of color spaces and communities (Johnson 2013). Further complicating matters, some of the participants represent digital spaces (Feministe, Feministing) that have proven historically hostile to women of color bloggers (Johnson 2013). To feminists of color “[t]hese are wounds that have never healed and cannot be healed unless this past is acknowledged, reconciled and dressed. Time and again the communal memory of radical bloggers has been pushed to the margins or glossed over instead of centered in the story of the revolt” (Johnson 2013).

In “#FemFuture, history & loving each other harder,” Assistant Professor of History Jessica Marie Johnson explores the problematic manner in which Martin and Valenti, the white feminists credited as authors of the report, sample the theoretical insights of the handful of women of color that were invited to attend the #FemFuture convening. She notes how the report’s refrain, “feminist blogs are the consciousness-raising groups

of our generation,” is not attributed to Samhita Mukhopadhyay of Feministing (Johnson 2013). To Johnson, this is

*emblematic of the larger problem with the gathering and mission of the project. In other words, the base of knowledge appears to be generated and propelled by black feminist and [radical] woc online activity; the citation, attribution, and support of this work appears to be missing; and those who stand to benefit most from the visibility and exposure [of] the report appear to be digital feminism's elite, women who already have professional capital, publications, and institutional funding. It may be that the report was meant to be a communal, co-authored venture, but if so, this isn't stated clearly. If only because of this history, it should be. (Johnson 2013)*

It seems that Valenti and Martin may be guilty of being lovingly, knowingly ignorant. According to Mariana Ortega, this is a condition suffered by the well-meaning white feminist who “sees herself as someone who really understands women of color, who is putting the voices of these women on the map, who is ‘giving’ them a voice” (2006, 62). Unfortunately, this loving, knowing ignorance “goes hand in hand with the production of knowledge about the experience of women of color. The result of this ignorance is that women of color continue to be misunderstood, underrepresented, homogenized, disrespected, or subsumed under the experience of ‘universal sisterhood’ while ‘knowledge’ about them is being encouraged and disseminated and while feminism claims to be more concerned and more enlightened about the relations between white women and women of color” (Ortega 2006, 62).

While the erasure of women of color from the future and past of feminism may not have been the intention of #FemFuture, the result is another narrative that assimilates not just the voices in the room but also the ones “who could not or were not asked to ‘show up:’ youth, transgender and genderqueer activists, non-US writers and thinkers, disability activists, single mothers, undocumented, incarcerated, and more” (Johnson 2013). As Johnson warns, “There is no hopscotching over these conflicts into a #FemFuture or we will find the future includes only certain feminists and a certain kinds of feminism” (2013).

The production of the #FemFuture report is emblematic of the white liberal feminist approach to its perceived exclusivity: symbolic multiculturalism. That is, mainstream feminist organizations have increasingly chosen to welcome marginalized women “into their ranks as long as the multicultural difference they make has no significance for



how these organizations will define the work. Inclusivity has therefore come to mean that we start with an organizing model developed with white, middle-class people in mind, and then simply add a multicultural component to it” (Smith 2006). Native American activist and feminist scholar Andrea Smith recommends that mainstream feminism stop fixating on superficial inclusion and instead center its analysis and organizing practice on the marginalized. By pursuing a politics of re-centering rather than inclusion, Smith believes that feminism will begin to “see the issue differently, not just for the group in question, but everyone” (2006).

Given its focus on symbolic inclusion, it is not surprising that #FemFuture failed to “build or sustain long-standing feminist coalitions across lines of race, class, sexuality, and nationality” (Keating 2005, 91). In part, this is because #FemFuture recognizes difference but not the relational nature of those differences. Specifically, the fact that “white women and women of color not only live different lives but white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do” (Brown 1992, 298). The failure to build a coalitional feminism, one that recognizes the relational and shifting nature of difference, is not just a failure of #FemFuture but of feminism itself. As Black feminist Barbara Smith maintains, “Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement” (Smith 1990, 25). But how does one build a feminist movement that is not built on female aggrandizement but rather on the liberation of all women?

In her influential essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway suggests that we begin by acknowledging: “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (1985, 439). Haraway urges white feminists to stop yearning for a “natural matrix of unity” (1985, 441) and to give up the “feminist dream of a common language, [for] like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, [it] is a totalizing and imperialist one” (456). It is time to accept that there is no such thing as feminism, no sole position from which to critique patriarchy: “such a position has been fractured ever since Sojourner Truth said ‘Ain’t I a woman too?’” (Bhandar and Ferreira da Silva 2013)

Mia McKenzie, the founder of the *Black Girl Dangerous* blog, recently echoed Haraway's call for a feminism based on affinities rather than essences. In a post entitled "The myth of shared female experience and how it perpetuates inequality," McKenzie declared "possession of vaginas in and of themselves are neither what define women nor what bond women to each other. Shared experiences of the world, which include experiences of race, sexuality, (dis)ability, economic class, any number of nuanced vulnerabilities... is what bonds women to each other" (McKenzie 2013). Feminists of the digital age must refuse the nostalgic discourse of authentic selves, of natural bodies, of fixed communities and instead attend to the "structures and relations that produce different kinds of subjects in position with different kinds of technologies" (Nguyen 2003, 302).

The coalitional and intersectional feminist subject does not, as some fear, spell the end of feminism. It signals the end of a certain conception of feminism, a (neo)liberal conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of womankind who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice (Hayles 1999, 286). Instead of mourning the death of the "recombinant liberal subject of feminism" (Nguyen 2003, 284), we should remember that there are and have always been other forms of feminist being (Sandoval 2000, 32). If, as Nancy Fraser argues, feminism has become "capitalism's handmaiden" (2013), this means that first world feminists have entered the "psychic terrain formerly inhabited by the historically decentered citizen-subject: the colonized, the outsider, the queer, the subaltern, the marginalized" (Sandoval 2000, 27). Surviving the neocolonial and globalizing conditions of late capitalism requires returning to the heyday of second wave feminism: the 1970s.

It was during the 1970s that U.S. feminists of color "identified common grounds on which to make coalitions across their own profound cultural, racial, class, sex, gender, and power differences. The insights gained during this period reinforced a common culture across difference comprised of the skills, values, and ethics generated by a subordinated citizenry compelled to live within similar realms of marginality" (Sandoval 2000, 52). This eccentric cohort of feminists developed many critical conceptual tools but, for Sandoval, the most potent was what she terms "differential consciousness." Differential consciousness engages "ideology, citizenship, and coalition as masquerade" (Sandoval 2000, 31). It requires a consciousness-in-opposition that "perceives itself at the center of myriad possibilities all cross-working—any of which is fodder for one's loyalties. Such loyalties, once committed, can be withdrawn and

relocated depending on survival, moral, and/or political imperatives” (Sandoval 2000, 31). It requires a coalitional subject, a feminist being mindful of intersections and contradictions, one willing to seek kinship with strangers. Does hashtag feminism bring such a subject into consciousness or further divide feminists? That is the question that I will take up in the final section.

### Toxic Twitter Wars, White Feminist Backlash, and Digital Feminist Praxis

*I cannot hide my anger to spare your guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since then it is no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge.*

– Audre Lorde

*We have to shift from catharsis and reckoning to change. It's time to build on the important work rising out of the hashtag. We have serious problems to deal with. We have a painful, infuriating history to reconcile — one where the concerns of heterosexual, able middle-class white women have too often been privileged at the expense of everyone else.*

– Roxane Gay



([http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada\\_Twitter5.png](http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada_Twitter5.png))

In “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, #BlackPowerIsForBlackmen, but many are still brave,” Mychal Denzel Smith declares these hashtags speak to an “unfortunate truth. Across movements, WOC are still being silenced, their concerns are going unaddressed, and their work is being policed in a way that leaves them with Twitter hashtags as the most visible means of fighting back” (Smith 2013). While some dismiss the potential of hashtag activism (Gay 2013, Goldberg 2014, Hobson 2013, Murphy 2013, and Wilde-Blavatsky 2013), Jamie Nesbitt Golden sees it as way of “engaging people on social media, allowing them to share their stories, to heal, to build — it’s a life-changing thing” (2013a). On December 3, 2013, she co-created the hashtag #FastTailedGirls with Hood Feminism Co-Founder Mikki Kendall to discuss the sexualization of black girls and the devastating consequences. Within a few hours, the topic trended nationally on Twitter, men and women talked about how the label impacted them. The response was

overwhelming and heartbreaking. It included “survivors of sexual abuse who had been too afraid to speak up, victims of sexual assault who were too afraid to report out of fear they’d be called ‘fast tailed girls’” (Golden 2013a).

Two weeks later, writer and activist Suey Park’s hashtag #NotYourAsianSidekick ignited a “vibrant dialogue about race, gender, privilege, feminism and intersectionality” (McDonough 2013).



([http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada\\_Twitter6.png](http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada_Twitter6.png))

For Park, the hashtag was about opening up a “third space” (Bobadilla 2013) for Asian-American, Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian women to critique patriarchy in Asian American spaces and racism of white feminism (Chen and Jha 2013). To Park’s delight, it became a space to talk about “queerness, disability, immigration, multiracial/biracial issues, compulsory coalitions, challenging anti-blackness, mental health, body image, and all things feminism ... [A]ll of the things we were told to never talk about” (Chen and Jha 2013). Park sees the hashtag as but one small step in a plan to take down “white, hetero, patriarchal, corporate America” (O’Connor 2013). Just as the tweets inspired by #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen revealed the historic nature of feminist divisions, #NotYourAsianSidekick illuminated issues that Asian Americans have been battling for the past half century. This prompted law professor and critical race theorist Mari Matsuda to tweet: “We theorized #NotYourAsianSidekick ideas since the 70s but kids gotta learn it from a damn hashtag. Still no Asian Am Studies at most U’s” (Yang 2013). Matsuda is sadly correct. This conversation is not new and is “as old as the notion of Asian America itself” (Yang 2013). Ultimately, the challenge for contemporary activists is how to learn from past struggles and channel the passion of social media into something more lasting: a grassroots movement. One of Park’s final tweets emphasized that this is was her goal:



Park has since partnered with Asian American advocacy group 18 Million Rising to turn the hashtag into a sustainable movement.

The same week that #NotYourAsianSidekick trended globally on Twitter (it was featured in 50,000 tweets that came from over 60 countries and appeared in over 95 million timelines) (Al Jazeera 2013a), Megan Murphy penned a post entitled “The Trouble With Twitter Feminism” that officially launched the white feminist backlash against predominantly WOC-led hashtag feminism. In it, Murphy dismisses Twitter as a “toxic” place for feminism, “a place where intellectual laziness is encouraged, oversimplification is mandatory, posturing is de rigueur, and bullying is rewarded ... a place hateful people are drawn towards to gleefully spread their hate, mostly without repercussion” (2013). She also decries the fact that “the women who built this movement... [are] relegated to snarky quips by third wavers whose postmodern indoctrination have them believing feminism is a series of made-up words and that identity politics are radical” (Murphy 2013). Murphy pointedly cites an essay by Ngọc Loan Trần in which they offered “calling in” as an alternative to calling people out for problematic behavior (2013). Calling out, Murphy argues, is an “unproductive and a fear-based response” (2013). Murphy, of course, fails to note that Trần envisioned “calling in” as a practice for parties that already have common ground and a certain measure of trust (Johnson 2013), elements that are often lacking in interactions between white feminists and WOC feminists online and off. Murphy ends her diatribe by demanding that Twitter Feminists remember that “feminism is a political movement to end patriarchy, not a popularity contest” (2013).

Two days later, *The Huffington Post UK* published an essay entitled “Stop Bashing White Women in the Name of Beyoncé: We Need Unity Not Division” that made remarkably similar points. In it, Adele Wilde-Blavatsky accused Mikki Kendall of “white women bashing” for her “dreadful Twitter campaign #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen” (2013). She

also suggested that Kendall had “blackened” the “work and efforts of white women in the feminist movement” by portraying them as the “enemy” of women of color (2013). Wilde-Blavatsky closed by proposing a hashtag campaign called #stopblamingwhitewomenweneedunity because: “If we allow race and ‘culture’ to divide rather than unite women then the patriarchy has won. On the other hand, women united can never be divided” (2013). Like white feminists in the first and second wave, Murphy and Wilde-Blavatsky universalize gender, minimize racism, and erase other vectors of difference that impact how patriarchy is experienced. Their calls for “unity” around “patriarchy,” instead of something more comprehensive like what bell hooks memorably christened white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (Jhally 1999), suggest that what Murphy and Wilde-Blavatsky truly seek is homogeneity and white feminist hegemony. Trudy of Gradient Lair reminds us that “this quest for ‘unity’ through erasure and silence has another word for it: oppression” (2013b).

“Feminism’s Toxic Twitter Wars,” the most high profile attack on hashtag feminism thus far, comes from Michelle Goldberg, a senior contributing writer for *The Nation*. Goldberg, the author of controversial gems like “Sympathy for Justine Sacco” and “The Absurd Backlash Against Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*,” begins the piece with a full-throated defense of #FemFuture (John and Jones 2014), which she describes as “earnest and studiously politically correct” (2014). She portrays Martin and Valenti, the authors of #FemFuture, as wanting to “bolster the voices of writers from marginalized communities” by investing in online feminism (2014). Goldberg depicts the critics of the report as filled with “coruscating anger and contempt” (2014). She condemns the “slashing righteousness of other feminists” and blames them for poisoning the feminist blogosphere: a place that “just a few years ago ... seemed an insouciant, freewheeling place, revivifying women’s liberation for a new generation” (Goldberg 2014). That is, until WOC feminists like Mikki Kendall invaded it with their toxic tweets. Goldberg is deeply critical of Kendall whom she characterizes as mean and obsessed, a bully feared by other feminists. For Goldberg, Kendall symbolizes the archetypical angry black woman, killing white feminist joy by daring to point out racism within feminist politics (Ahmed 2013). Goldberg clearly has Kendall in mind when she writes: “the expectation that feminists should always be ready to berate themselves for even the most minor transgressions ... creates an environment of perpetual psychodrama, particularly when coupled with the refusal to ever question the expression of an oppressed person’s anger” (2014). She concludes by suggesting that people are “disengaging from online feminism” because of the toxic tactics of hashtag feminists like Kendall.

Unsurprisingly, Goldberg's article set the feminist Internet ablaze. Veronica Arreola of Viva La Feminista, was insulted by Goldberg's defense of #FemFuture, which erased the myriad critiques of Latinas, Asian women, and Native women by solely focusing on the response of Black feminist Twitter (2014). AnaYelsi Sanchez, founder of #SecretLivesofFeministas, reminded Goldberg that

*It isn't just Black women pushing back. It's all women of color. The sort of gaslighting and marginalization in Michelle Goldberg's article is what sparked #SecretLivesOfFeministas and other similar movements. It's easier to ignore us and focus on vilifying the "angry black woman" than to acknowledge the legitimacy of all of our anger. We're not going away. We're not sitting down. We're not shutting up. (Arreola 2014)*

Several feminist commentators suggest that the real issue is power not tone (Daniels 2014; Kaba and Smith 2014; Kendzior 2014; Trudy 2014a; Park and Leonard 2014) and that equating criticism of mainstream feminism with bullying effectively silences the voices of WOC, queer women, trans women, and poor women (Crommunist 2014; Hopkins 2014; Trudy 2014b). Like Murphy and Wilde-Blavatsky, Goldberg demands that "those who are the victims of oppression be more accommodating and sensitive to the needs of the oppressor" (Crommunist 2014). Jessie Daniels, cyber-racism scholar and CUNY professor, sees the dismissal of hashtag feminism as toxic, as a reflection of the "lack of reading, understanding and deep intellectual engagement with black feminist thought by the vast majority of white women and most white feminists" (2014).

While there is no denying that the Internet can be a nasty and brutish place, the narratives of Murphy, Wilde-Blavatsky, and Goldberg reimagine the digital realm as "a democratic nirvana ... disrupted by angry, disruptive, and divisive feminism" (Park and Leonard, 2014). Their narratives portray the incivility and toxicity as unidirectional and confined to social media (Kama and Smith, 2014) and ignore the fact that "power, privilege, and structures of inequality remain in operation online" (Park and Leonard, 2014). This is what WOC feminists object to: the white feminist "inversion of the way bullying and marginalization generally works in the world of gender activism" (Imani Perry as quoted in Park and Leonard, 2014). In "Interlopers on Social Media: Feminism, Women of Color and Oppression," Miriama Kaba and Andrea Smith emphasize the fraught consequences of these characterizations for black women in particular: "Under this frame, black women's stories of harrowing racist and sexist attacks are easily dismissed. Black women are portrayed as the bullies and never the bullied. As Saidiya Hartman and Jared Sexton have noted, black suffering is always made illegible. Yet

white women are portrayed as sympathetic and worthy of our concern” (2014). In the end, “The commitment to narratives of white female innocence does far more damage to feminism than Twitter arguments” (Imani Perry as quoted in Park and Leonard, 2014).



([http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada\\_Twitter8.png](http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Ada_Twitter8.png))

What is currently taking place on Twitter, tumblr, Facebook, and other digital platforms is not a popularity contest between the mean girls of social media as NPR offensively suggested in a recent segment on Michel Martin’s “Tell Me More,” (Martin 2014) but rather “a raucous and contentious discussion about who owns feminism” (Kaba and Smith, 2014). And while Murphy, Wilde-Blavatsky, and Goldberg see this as a balkanization of feminism, feminists of color, trans feminists, queer feminists, working class feminists, and their allies see this as the birth of a new liberation movement that is not necessarily ‘feminist’ in nature but rooted in “a history of oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval 2000, 53). Like their feminist predecessors of color, hashtag feminists have found common ground and are beginning to build coalitions across profound cultural, racial, class, sex, gender, and power differences (Sandoval 2000, 52). The work is not easy but they realize that the only way to make feminism less toxic is to “actually end white supremacy, settler colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy” (Kaba and Smith, 2014). That means that “the feminist revolution will be tweeted, hashtagged, Vined and Instagrammed” (Irwin 2013). It will take place online and off. And if feminists like Murphy, Wilde-Blavatsky, and Goldberg want a place in this brave new #FemFuture, they will have to learn to see the potential of anger. For as Audre Lorde fittingly reminds us,

The angers between women will not kill us if we can articulate them with precision, if we listen to the content of what is said with at least as much intensity as we defend ourselves against the manner of saying. When we turn from anger we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the designs already known, deadly and safely familiar.” (2007)

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## 20 THOUGHTS ON “HASHTAG FEMINISM, #SOLIDARITYISFORWHITEWOMEN, AND THE OTHER #FEMFUTURE”



**Pat**

**JULY 21, 2014 AT 4:54 AM**

I really appreciate this well-researched overview and the copious references. I know an article like this has to cut off somewhere, but do you have any insight on the role of 4chan trolling in these events?



★ **Susana Loza**

**JULY 21, 2014 AT 9:50 PM**

Dear Pat: I am afraid my focus was mainly on Twitter so I did not explore how 4chan or Reddit might amplify what some see as trolling or toxic behavior. I would be very interested in how different social media intersect and compound the issue.



**Pat**

**JULY 22, 2014 AT 12:47 AM**

Thanks for the reply – I was actually referring to twitter, to the 4chan members who made so many false feminist twitter accounts for the purpose of sowing discord among feminists on twitter. A long list of them has been collected under #yourslipisshowing. Since the hoax was apparently started as long ago as 2013, I'm wondering how much of the twitter conflict you describe was exacerbated by 4chan trolls posing as feminists. After all, people began to complain about anti-white feminist hostility on twitter at just that time.

I'm sure somebody is doing the legwork on that one – I can't be the only person who's noticed the coincidence of dates!



**Susana Loza**

**JULY 22, 2014 AT 8:16 PM**

I see. Well, I cannot speak to that but I suppose that's because my piece was more concerned with unpacking the hostility generated by the WOC feminist hashtags, particularly the virulent mainstream white feminist responses. Thanks for bringing that hashtag to my attention.

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**T.L. Cowan**

**DECEMBER 1, 2014 AT 12:47 PM**

Susana, what a powerhouse essay — you've traced so much of the detail from those online/continuing moments! I'm so happy to be in the same issue with you! Thanks for doing this important massively citational work of cataloging and conversing with this archive.

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