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#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen: Hashtags as a Bridge to Feminist "Pasts"

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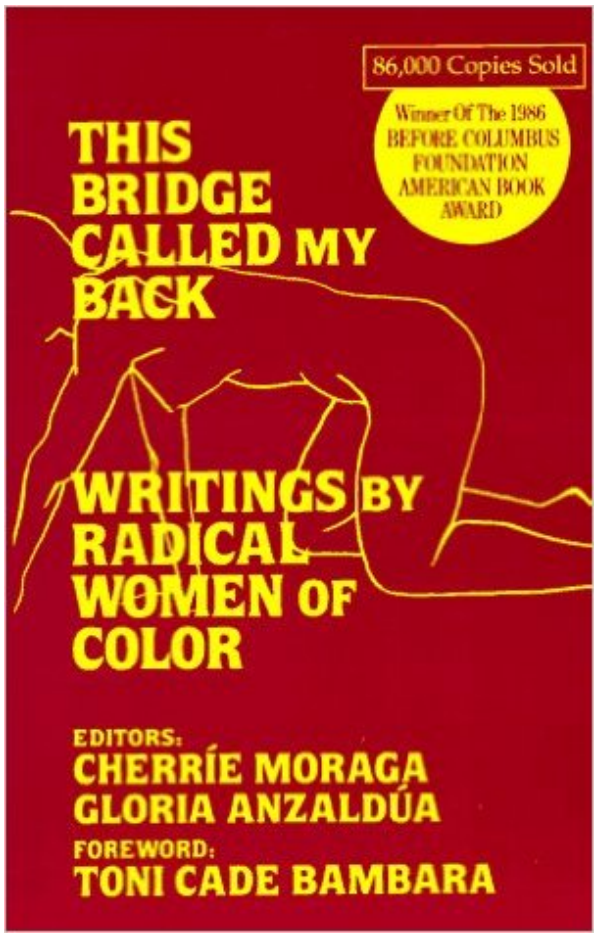

When I first began teaching "Feminist Theories and Politics" at Winona State University—a predominantly white institution comprised of nearly half first generation students in rural Minnesota—Michelle Goldberg had just published "Feminism's Toxic Twitter Wars." Many students, having a stronger grasp than I did on Twitter and Tumblr feminist discussions, were familiar with the so-called "Twitter Wars"; however, they lacked a historical framework for examining the ways these dialogues tie into a longer trajectory of feminist politics and knowledge production. Teaching these present dialogues as echoes of past criticisms refutes the replication of technofetishism, which risks privileging the technological mode of communication and erases the activist and scholarly labor of feminists.

To frame the connections between these hashtags and a larger feminist archive, I assigned Becky Thompson's "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," which allowed me to confront progressive narratives of modernity. Many students utilize a presentism to suggest past feminisms were "racist," while not self-reflexively examining their own relation to contemporary dialogues of social inequality.

Feminist writer Mikki Kendall launched the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen on August 12, 2013 in response to the dismissal of racism and intersectional analysis of gender by mainstream white feminists. The dismissal stemmed from some mainstream feminists' support of Hugo Schwyzer— a controversial male feminist and blogger—who attacked women of color on Twitter. Kendall's hashtag builds from a strong feminist archive of critique against white racism and privilege in feminist movements. The cyclical nature of this debate highlights the importance of continuing to analyze intersecting identities and material realities, a central goal of the feminist theory classroom.

As Kendall argued in a Guardian article in August 14, 2013: "An honest conversation between feminists about feminism and its future is happening, and like every truly honest discussion of differences, it has been incredibly contentious. Hopefully, it will also be productive: despite the natural brevity encouraged by Twitter, any conversation that can span a full day must generate some change." In fact, this conversation spans multiple generations of feminist activists from the 1977 Black feminist "Combahee River Collective Statement" to the 1981 first edition publication of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing By Radical Women of Color*, a text intent on addressing marginalization within radical political movements. As editors Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1984) stated: "The women writing here are committed feminists. We are challenging white feminists to be accountable for their racism because at the base we still want to believe that they really want freedom for all of us" (1984, 62). Similarly, Kendall and Park's hashtags challenge contemporary feminists to acknowledge racial justice as central to the demands of ending sexist oppression.

An interrogation of "solidarity narratives" that refute accountability for racism has been essential to past feminist action and continues to be central in Kendall's criticism. Feminist scholar Becky Thompson (2002) offers a "recasting" of feminist history that moves beyond a progressive wave narrative that privileges predominantly white, middle-class feminist voices and offers a directive for moving toward a cross-racial feminist future:

> *Conversations and struggles between women of color and white women encouraged white women to think about the limits of the popular feminist slogan "Sisterhood Is Powerful." . . . Cross-racial struggle made clear the work that white women needed to do . . . Listen to women of color's anger. It is informed by centuries of struggle, erasure, and experience. (2002, 346-347)*

The erasure continues, but feminist hashtags offer a new site of communication to address anti-racist feminism, which furthers the need to acknowledge overlapping and intersecting histories.

As Aura Bogado posted on Twitter in August 2013**,** #Solidarityisforwhitewomen is when you're sick of the hashtag for a few hours, and we're sick of your privilege for a few centuries." Examining the common themes between the tweets and past critiques offers contemporary lessons for coalition building. Using Thompson's analysis of building bridges across racial difference, students mapped relations between current tweets and the words of radical women of color in *This Bridge Called My Back* and the Combahee River Collective. In doing so, they discussed how Twitter preserves the reminder of listening as a political process for building strong allyship and movements. As Thompson points out, we must constantly heed Audre Lorde's pivotal question "Are you doing your work?" (2002, 348).

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Kendall's hashtag continues the political intent of *This Bridge Called My Back*. As explicitly stated in the foreword: "The political writer, then, is the ultimate optimist, believing people are capable of change and using words as one way to try and penetrate the privatism of our lives. A privatism which keeps us back and away from each other, which renders us politically useless" (Moraga 1984, "Foreword"). Social networking platforms have become politicized spaces for feminist media scholars and, through the examination of feminist dialogues from a multiracial standpoint, expose the continued and reverberating concerns of racism amongst feminists.

Through this examination, students were able to see the complex and contradicting history of feminism. I

challenged students to examine this resonating archive, asking: **"**How do these narratives challenge the progressive narrative of **'**feminist waves**'**? What lessons might we glean from working across difference for stronger social movements?**"** My hope is that our historical tracing of these contemporary debates can offer a blueprint for the necessary work of theorizing and practicing intersectional feminism.

References

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