

(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism

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To say that Black lives matter¹ has become both a technological and cultural phenomenon in the United States is an understatement. The hashtag and those discursively linked to it have been used more than 100 million times, and the visibility and persistence of Black lives matter activists—from highway shutdowns in America's largest cities to the takeover of presidential candidates' political rallies—have led to widespread social and political debate about what has been dubbed “the new civil rights movement” (Freelon et al.; Jackson and Foucault Welles, “#Ferguson”). Yet there seems to be considerable consternation among academics, journalists, and politicians about how to incorporate the standpoints of a new generation of activists into our national politics. In this essay I discuss how these activists have manifested Black feminist impulses through social media and beyond, and suggest it is the responsibility of those invested in (re)imagining a more democratic process to closely consider the radically intersectional lessons of the current movement.

The Black lives matter movement can be traced to the legacy of the larger Black freedom movement, but also more recently to the work of millennial Black activist organizations like the Dream Defenders and the Black Youth Project 100 (Cohen and Jackson). Members of these organizations and the young people who align themselves with their work have come of age in a country overwhelmingly celebratory of its racial progress but silent on the lasting impact of its racial sins. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, among others, has detailed how neoliberal color-blind politics have dangerously entrenched the American impulse to reject explicit political critiques of white supremacy as unnecessary or outmoded. Similarly, millennials have borne witness to an America claiming postfeminism alongside seemingly constant attacks on women's bodies and bodily autonomy, and a country simultaneously moving toward greater lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) inclusion while silencing queer critiques and bodies that do not mold to the mainstream (McRobbie; Walters). Today's racial justice activists have responded to these political contradictions with discourse and tactics both familiar and unfamiliar to members of the old guard. In particular, millennial activists have rejected the respectability politics that guided much of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and have turned to new technologies as tools for the promulgation and solidification of messages, nurturing a counterpublic community that centers the voices of those most often at the margins.

Black Lives Matter's organizational founders, and other members of the larger Movement for Black Lives collective, have insisted on discourses of intersectionality that value and center all Black lives, including, among others, Black women, femmes, and queer and trans folk.² This stands in contrast to the impulses of the historical Black freedom movement, which chose to center cisgender Black men in racial justice struggles, intentionally and strategically marginalizing cisgender Black women and queer folks who might be seen as unworthy of rights within the logics of capitalist heteropatriarchy (Smith). As Alicia Garza explains in “Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” (among other public interviews and writing), the phrase and hashtag were first publicly used in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the 2012 murder of teenager Trayvon Martin, but represent an idea much larger than that singular case or moment.

Along with other Black Lives Matters founders Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors, Garza has long insisted on the radical intersectionality of the phrase, writing:

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the

lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. (Garza)

It matters that Garza, Tometi, and Cullors are women, Garza and Cullors are queer, and Tometi is the daughter of immigrants; their activism prior to and since the founding of Black Lives Matter includes organizing domestic workers, immigration activism, criminal justice reform, advocating for victims of domestic violence, and health care rights. Thus, the founders of Black Lives Matter not only live intersectional lives but have long been engaged with intersectional activism. For Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, the personal and political are truly intertwined and the political is unquestionably intersectionality.

Of course, contemporary activists have not succeeded in centering intersectional concerns from within a void. Decades of work—particularly by Black and queer feminist academics and activists like Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins, plus the painfully slow but increasing inclusion of Americans who experience gender, race, and/or class oppression in institutions of higher education—have exposed a growing number of young Americans to academic theories of intersectionality early in their politicization and education. Further, grassroots community-organizing traditions that have been practiced and refined for decades by Black women like Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Marsha P. Johnson have empowered new generations of Black women to demand their experiences be made central to community concerns. Thus, the aspiration of the new radical Black politic is for Black teenage mothers, homeless Black trans people, and queer Black androgynes to matter in our national political consciousness as much as anyone else.

The visibility of these efforts is unsurprisingly mired in an evolving ideological battle between the margins, where intersectional concerns are centered, and the mainstream, where politics simultaneously make minute accommodations of intersectional frameworks while silencing larger critiques. Pushback against the contemporary politics of radical intersectionality comes from many sites, some painfully close. Primarily, mainstream institutions and elites, through discursive absences, have erased intersectional concerns from the most visible accounts of and responses to contemporary activism. This erasure has been perpetuated by those the movement would like to consider allies, like President Barack Obama and sympathetic journalists who often exclude women, girls, and trans and queer folk on the still too rare occasions they directly address racialized state violence; and by demagogues on the right who have proudly declared themselves enemies of the movement they denigrate using old narratives of Black pathology and new ones of a mythical color blindness.

Further, some old-guard members of the civil rights movement, many of whom represent a middle-class, churchgoing, Black elite, have themselves erased the intersectional concerns of contemporary activists by clinging to values of respectability, and members of both the feminist and LGBTQ establishment have suggested the tactics, politics, and style of Black lives matter activists are divisive. And finally, the cultural impulse toward centering male activists has created some rupture in the movement over the rising celebrity of figures like DeRay McKesson instead of women organizers like Garza, Tometi, and Cullors (Cobb).

Yet I suggest it is twenty-first-century activists, as exemplified by the Black lives matter movement, who have finally succeeded in making intersectional issues of racial oppression visible to mainstream America. Their tools have been both the networked counterpublics which nourish them and the physical shedding of respectability in how they interrupt and take up space in the political and cultural places that have too long included them only if they willingly remain at the margins. The latter has been illustrated repeatedly in 2015 and 2016 as Black lives matter activists have insisted on the right to space, speech, and critique at Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders events. As I write, queer Black lives matter activists have gained national attention by withdrawing from the San Francisco Pride parade to protest increased police presence and are holding a

sit-in at Toronto Pride, demanding the exclusion of police and the inclusion of resources for queer disabled people and queer Black youth.

The hashtags that have arisen alongside and in collusion with #BlackLivesMatter are similarly reflective of this unrepentantly intersectional Black liberation politic. In online counterpublic networks, Black women—cis and trans, some everyday citizens with little access to institutional power and others media personalities, some queer, some straight, some poor and disabled—have played an outsized role in shaping recent national conversations about everything from police brutality to gender identity to popular culture, with the creation of hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #GirlsLikeUs, and #OscarsSoWhite (Bailey and Gossett; Jackson and Foucault Welles, “Hijacking”). Among others, Black women have created and popularized hashtags that observe the raced aspects of street harassment, center the experiences of incarcerated Black trans women, offer interventions to mainstream white feminist erasures of Black women’s experiences, and critique the appropriation and commodification of Black women’s styles.

Certainly, there are limits to the democratic possibilities of online engagement. The mainstream logics of scholarly research, journalism, and politics have sometimes reinterpreted the counterpublic discourses created online in ways that strip them of their meanings and make their context and creators invisible (Kingston Mann). Further, the internet itself, including the technological architecture of social media spaces, has complex ties to projects of militarism, advertising, and surveillance that tip the scales of power against counterpublics (Foster and McChesney). Yet hashtags arising from a Black feminist politic take advantage of this architecture to perform the two basic functions of counterpublic discourse: reflect the experiences and needs of a marginalized community and call on mainstream politics to listen and respond.

In June 2016, for example, the hashtag #GirlIGuessImWithHer spread quickly across the Twittersphere as voters disenchanted with the limited possibilities of the current democratic process resigned themselves to supporting Hillary Clinton. Like the other hashtags noted here, #GirlIGuessImWithHer was started by a Black woman in what both scholars and the media have come to refer to as “Black Twitter” (Sharma; Florini). In its very language, the underlying ability of “Girl I Guess” to laugh, snark, and sigh at being in an always-exhausting position of not having one’s full interests represented in politics reflects a unique form of communication typified by Black women’s speech (Bailey and Gumbs; Houston). The hashtag, which almost immediately was picked up by a diversity of Twitter users, intentionally rearticulated the Clinton political slogan #ImWithHer, generating discussion and debate with those engaged in mainstream politics. Those using #GirlIGuessImWithHer cited intersectional concerns regarding Hillary Clinton’s role in the 1994 Crime Bill, welfare reform, and more recent policy initiatives they believe have had a deleterious impact on women and people of color globally.

The impulse to dismiss communication that arises from a counterpublic centering millennial Black feminist thought can be seen in how media outlets initially reported on #GirlIGuessImWithHer as simply a disgruntled eruption from Sanders supporters, despite the complexity of political frameworks motivating those who started it (Rigueur). In considering hashtags like #GirlIGuessImWithHer, scholars face the challenge of not reproducing limited constructions of democracy and democratic engagement that have legitimized our less than representative—and certainly *not* radically inclusive—academic institutions and national politics. Ultimately, hashtags and other forms of situated knowledge arising from networked counterpublics and embraced by a new generation of Black activists should be treated as important contributions to the democratic process. They are a call to include nuanced issues of identity in activist spaces and in national political conversations. They are a call to recognize the value of political thought that arises from the margins and that just might transform our democracy, if we let it.

Notes

1. In this essay I use the lowercase “Black lives matter movement” to refer to the contemporary iteration of the Black freedom movement, I capitalize Black Lives Matter when referring to the formal organization of the same name or in the context of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, in which it is generally capitalized for ease of reading.
2. The platform and policy demands of the Movement for Black Lives can be found at <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>.

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