

2016

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Recommended Citation

Daniels, Jessie. "The Trouble with White Feminism: Whiteness, Digital Feminism and the Intersectional Internet," in, *Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex and Culture Online*, Andre Brock, Safiya Noble and Brendesha Tynes, Eds., Peter Lang Digital Edition series, (2016).

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**“The Trouble with White Feminism:
Whiteness, Digital Feminism and the Intersectional Internet”**

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Submitted for consideration to the volume *The Intersectional Internet, Section Two:*

Cultural Values in the Machine (2016)

ABSTRACT (210): In August, 2013 Mikki Kendall, writer and pop culture analyst, started the hashtag #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen as a form of cyberfeminist activism directed at the predominantly white feminist activists and bloggers at sites like Feministing, Jezebel and Pandagon who failed to acknowledge the racist, sexist behavior of one their frequent contributors. Kendall’s hashtag activism quickly began trending and reignited a discussion about the trouble with white feminism. A number of journalists have excoriated Kendall specifically, and women of color more generally, for contributing to a “toxic” form of feminism. Yet what remains unquestioned in these journalistic accounts and in the scholarship to date, is the dominance of white women as architects and defenders of a framework of white feminism – not just in the second wave but today, in the digital era.. In this chapter, I offer a critique of white feminism as it plays out on the intersectional Internet. To do this, I critically examine three examples of white women’s feminist activism: Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* and “Ban Bossy” campaigns, Eve Ensler’s *One Billion Rising*, and *The Future of Online Feminism* report. I end with a discussion about the difficulty of challenging white feminism, how necessary it is to move forward, and how crucial the Internet is for sustaining such a critique.

Keywords: race, whiteness, feminism, digital activism, popular culture

Paper word count: 7,556 (not including references)

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2013, writer and pop culture analyst Mikki Kendall grew increasingly frustrated watching her friends being viciously attacked online. Kendall's friends, like her, are women of color engaged in digital activism through social media, particularly Twitter and writing in longer form on their own blogs and online news outlets. Kendall's friends were being called names, bullied, and threatened by a white male academic who identified as a "male feminist". During a rather public meltdown, the man admitted that he had intentionally "trashed" women of color, posting on Twitter: "I was awful to you because you were in the way" (Kendall, 2013).

If the behavior of this one man was hurtful and disappointing, it was the lack of action by mostly white digital feminists that prompted Kendall to start the hashtag. For Kendall, it was the inaction of prominent white feminists bloggers¹ who failed to acknowledge the racist, sexist behavior of one their frequent contributors prompted her to create #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen.² Kendall's form of cyberfeminist activism in creating the hashtag quickly began trending on Twitter and ignited a wide range of discussions about social media, feminism and call-out culture. One journalist, Michelle Goldberg, excoriated Kendall specifically, and women of color more generally, for starting a "toxic Twitter war" that is destructive for feminism (Goldberg, 2014). Another journalist referred to Kendall's hashtag in a sideways swipe at the "convulsions of

¹ Kendall named Jill Filipovic, Jessica Coen, Jessica Valenti and Amanda Marcotte, in particular. They have written (or founded) popular feminist sites such as Feministing, Jezebel and Pandagon.

² For the uninitiated, a hashtag is merely a word or phrase with a # symbol in front of it. It is a way to have a conversation around a topic on Twitter; if it catches on, the hashtag is said to be 'trending,' and appears on a sidebar that attracts even more attention to it.

ensoriousness” among American liberals online and is damaging for all of liberalism (Chait, 2015). A third journalist, Ronson, writes sympathetically about a white woman who lost her PR job because of “one stupid Tweet” (“Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!”) that “blew up” her life (Ronson, 2015). Ronson is also the author of a book about being ‘publicly shamed,’ and his focus is on the destructiveness of call-out culture and social media on the lives of otherwise well-intentioned people. While not about white feminism online, Ronson’s account of the “one stupid Tweet” incident completely elides the racism of the woman’s remarks and instead reconfigures her as a victim of those who called her out online, including many of the women of color Kendall was supporting with her hashtag activism. This is precisely what Goldberg argues in her analysis of the “toxicity” online, which she locates within women of color, such as Kendall, and not within dominant white feminism.

What remains unquestioned in these journalistic accounts and in the scholarship to date, is the dominance of white women as architects and defenders of a framework of feminism in the digital era. Although a number of scholars have critiqued the first or second waves of feminist movements as rooted in whiteness (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982; Truth, 2009; Ware, 1992), there is little existing literature that does lay out a systematic critique of whiteness in contemporary digital feminist activism. To address this gap in our understanding of white feminism, I examine three case studies of white feminist activism: 1) Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* and “Ban Bossy” campaigns, 2)

Eve Ensler's *One Billion Rising*, and 3) *The Future of Online Feminism* report. Through these three case studies I will demonstrate some of the trouble with white feminism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the early days of the Internet, some scholars theorized that the emergence of virtual environments and a culture of fantasy would mean an escape the boundaries of race and the experience of racism. A few imagined that people would go online to escape their embodied racial and gender identities (Nakamura, 2002; Turkle, 1997) and some saw this as a "utopia" where there is "no race, no gender" as the 1990s telecom commercial rendered it. Yet, the reality that has emerged is quite different. Race and racism persist online in ways that are both new and unique to the Internet, alongside vestiges of centuries-old forms that reverberate significantly both offline and on (Brock, 2006, 2009; Daniels, 2009, 2013). The reality of the Internet we have today has important implications for understanding whiteness and feminism.

The examination of whiteness in the scholarly literature is, by now, well established (Fine et al., 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Hughey, 2010; Twine and Gallagher, 2008). Whiteness, like other racial categories, is socially constructed and actively maintained through social boundaries. A key strategy in maintaining these boundaries is through efforts to define who is, and is not, white, with ample historical evidence showing how the boundaries of whiteness are malleable across time, place and social context (Allen, 1994; Daniels, 1997; Roediger, 2007; Wray, 2006). Along with this shape-shifting feature of whiteness, a seeming invisibility, or 'unmarked' quality, is often noted as a central mechanism of whiteness because it allows those within the

category 'white' to think of themselves as simply human, individual and without race, while Others are racialized (Dyer, 1988). At the same time, some scholars have noted that whiteness can also be characterized by a paradoxical 'hypervisibility' (Reddy, 1998). We know that whiteness shapes housing (Low, 2009), education (Leonardo, 2009), politics (Feagin, 2012; Painter, 2010), law (Lopez, 2006; Painter, 2010), social science research methods (Arnesen, 2001; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008) and indeed, frames much of our (mis)understanding of U.S. society (Feagin, 2010; Lipsitz, 2006/1998; Painter, 2010; Mills, 1999). Much of the writing in the field of whiteness studies has come from the U.S. and remains rather myopically focused on the North American context (Bonnett, 2008); however, scholars writing in a transnational, postcolonial framework have begun the work of "re-orienting whiteness" with a more global lens (Anderson, 2006; Boucher, Carey, & Ellinghaus, 2009).

Those writing in the field of media studies point to British scholar Richard Dyer's (1988) essay 'White' in the film journal *Screen* as the catalyst for subsequent scholarly considerations of the representational power of whiteness. Of course, such a reading of the field of whiteness studies elides the contributions of scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois who was writing about whiteness a century earlier. As a number of scholars from DuBois onward (e.g., Brock, 2006; Twine and Gallagher, 2008) have been critical observers of whiteness out of necessity. As bell hooks notes: "black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one another ...knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people" (hooks, 1992, p. 338). Still, Dyer's work, in both the *Screen* article (1988) and the elaboration of that into book-length form in *White* (1993), has

been enormously influential in both whiteness studies and visual culture. In this too, Dyer follows the path of DuBois who through his photo exhibition at the 1900 world's fair was principally concerned with addressing racial inequality through a particular deployment of visual representation (Smith, 2004).

One of the key insights of whiteness studies is that it is difficult to speak about white pathology because, as Dyer suggests, it falls apart in your hands, or it fades into what is merely "human" (Dyer, 1988, p.22). Whiteness is such a mercurial topic to analyze precisely because it does not inhere in bodies but rather functions to reinforce a system of domination (Nakayama 2000). The issue is not only the representation of whiteness, but what whiteness is used to do (Projansky and Ono, 1999). The white racial frame (Feagin, 2006; 2010) is a key component of how whiteness gets operationalized in popular culture. Yet, whiteness is not often the focus of critical attention when it comes to discussions of the Internet and race (a notable exception to this is MacPherson, 2003), and to date, there is scant research on whiteness and women online (Daniels, 2009).

The historical antecedents of white feminism are rooted in colonialism. In *Beyond the Pale* (1992), Ware examines the way attempts to enlarge the scope of women's opportunities simultaneously worked to support regimes that restricted such opportunities for people of color. She uses the historical evidence to make the argument that contemporary feminists' failure to recognize the function of race in the fashioning of white femininity. One of Ware's most enduring contributions is her argument for the political necessity of analyzing whiteness as an ethnicity as a way

forward. As she observes, “white feminists have managed to avoid dissecting these cultural and racial components of white femininity, although they have become eager to hear what black women have to say about their racialized and gendered identities” (Ware, 1992, p.85). Subsequent research has explained how it is that white feminists “avoid dissecting” white femininity.

Whiteness is crucial in structuring the lived experiences of white women across a variety of contexts. In a qualitative study with white women in California, Frankenberg found that most white girls are taught to fear black men, yet all the women in her small sample said they struggled with trying to situate themselves within or outside of existing structures of racialization. In a study of white women in South London, Byrne (2008) demonstrates how dominant ideas of the commonsense and normal come to be overlaid with racialized notions of whiteness. In the UK, understanding 'race' among white women is often about understanding silences because it is regarded a taboo subject. However, race is not a taboo subject for all white women, such as those of the far right.

White women on the far right have historically talked about race and continue to do so in the digital era. During the 1920s in the U.S., a third of the white native-born women in Indiana belonged to the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (Blee, 2009, p.125). Blee argues that the WKKK provided white women with an outlet for political participation, social connection, and a sense of belonging and collective importance (Blee, 2009, p.128). In the digital era, at Stormfront the global portal for “white pride,” there is a “Ladies Only” discussion board. The women there are openly, explicitly dedicated to

discussing the cause of white supremacy, and who are also espousing liberal feminist views. The “ladies” at Stormfront are in favor of the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to have an abortion (although they are conflicted about terminating pregnancies that would result in the birth of a white child), and even in favor of some gay rights (as long as they’re still white supremacists).

The women in the “Ladies Only” discussion identify as both white supremacists and as feminists, and see no contradiction between these worldviews. And, this suggests something troubling about liberal feminism. To the extent that liberal feminism articulates a limited vision of gender equality without challenging racial inequality, then white feminism is not inconsistent with white supremacy. Without an explicit challenge to racism, white feminism is easily grafted onto white supremacy and useful for arguing for equality for white women within a white supremacist context (Daniels, 2009).

In the current multimedia landscape, whiteness remains an infrequently examined part of feminist digital activism. While there is a growing literature about race and racism in Internet studies (Daniels, 2013), there has not been peer-reviewed academic scholarship to date that critically examines white feminism online. In the section that follows, I take up three case studies of white feminism.

CASE STUDIES OF WHITE FEMINISM

I selected the following case studies for their prominence in American popular culture during 2012-2014. These three cases were also widely discussed among feminists online on blogs and through Twitter. All three of the case studies have strong

components of online engagement and digital activism, both by design of their creators and through the comments of feminists and others who are critical of these projects.

Lean In & “Ban Bossy”

Sheryl Sandberg is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook and has recently emerged as a leading spokesperson for a particular kind of feminism. In 2013, Sandberg explains that she was encouraged to write *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013) based on her TED Talk that received more than 5 million views. Sandberg’s basic message is that there are so few women leaders in politics, government and corporations because women are limiting themselves. If women can just get out of their own way and “lean in” – by which she means assert themselves in male-dominated offices and board rooms -- then the entire “power structure of the world” will be changed and this will “expand opportunities for all” (Sandberg, 2013). More than merely a self-help book, *Lean In* is also an online campaign and what Sandberg likes to refer to as “a movement”. Sandberg hopes to inspire women to create their own “Lean In Circles,” or peer support groups, to facilitate leaning in.

Sandberg concedes that she has only recently begun to identify as a feminist. While her book is her first public declaration of her feminism, what she articulates is a form of liberal feminism with a long history interwoven with whiteness, class privilege, colonialism and heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2006; Collins, 2002; Spelman, 1988; Srivastava, 2005). The answer to Sandberg’s central question of “why there aren’t more women leaders” is not that there are structural barriers or systematic inequality, but that women need to change. The intended audience for Sandberg’s message is and a

particular kind of woman: heterosexual, married (or planning to marry), cisgender, middle to upper-middle class, predominantly (though not exclusively) white women working in corporations. Drawing on her experience as an executive at Facebook, and before that at Google, Sandberg instructs her audience on “choosing the right husband” (one who helps with domestic labor and childcare). A search for the words “lesbian” “gay” or “transgender” in the text of *Lean In* yields “no results.” Similarly, there is almost no mention of African American, Asian American, Native American or Latina in the book or any discussion of how “leaning in” might be different for women who are not white. Reading Sandberg it is clear that she imagines a world where all the women are white, cisgender, heterosexual, married or about to be, middle or upper-middle class, and working in corporations. Such a narrow conceptualization of who is included in the category of “woman” fits neatly with liberal feminism.

The basic tenets of liberal feminism emphasize equal access to opportunity for women and men. The goal of liberal feminism is for women to attain the same levels of representation, compensation and power in the public sphere as men. In order for change to happen, liberal feminists rely primarily on women’s ability to achieve equality through their own individual actions and choices. In the first wave of feminism, this meant advocating for white women’s right to vote; in the second wave, this meant advocating for things like the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution, but distancing the movement from the “lavender menace” of lesbians (Frye, 2001). While third wave feminists were more conscientiously intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991), Sandberg’s version of feminism decidedly does not consider the multiplicity of gender

expression or experiences. For Sandberg, the root cause of gender inequality rests with the individual choices women make, and to a lesser extent, society's beliefs about women (which they then internalize). In order for there to be "more women leaders," women need to shake off their temerity, sharpen their elbows and claim their space at the corporate table. The praxis – the actual work involved that follows from such a perspective – becomes the "motivational work" women must do on themselves to fit into the male-dominated corporate structure, not on changing that structure or the economic system that it rests upon. Given the huge effort of this motivational work, it is best to start early.

Sandberg believes that young girls are being given the wrong messages in childhood, also an implication of liberal feminism. According to Sandberg, girls with leadership potential are called "bossy" – a pejorative in American culture -- and internalize this message. To create change, she envisions a world in which all little girls who were called "bossy" come to see themselves instead as "leaders". To facilitate this change, Sandberg has now launched a spin-off campaign, in partnership with the Girl Scouts, called "Ban Bossy." In the illustration for the campaign, a figure of a little girl sits with her head down, playing alone. The large, bold text reads: "Bossy holds girls back." Below that, in a smaller font, the text reads: "Girls are twice as likely as boys to worry that leadership roles will make them seem 'bossy.'" Along the bottom, there is a link to BanBossy.com. The "twice as likely" claim about the greater concern among girls about seeming "bossy," is a cornerstone for the campaign. This fact is taken from a small subsample (N=360) of a 2008 study conducted by the Girl Scout Research

Institute (Girls Scouts of America, 2008). The subsample included those who said they were “not interested” in leadership positions.

While it is true that 29% of girls and 13% of boys in the subsample said “I do not want to seem bossy,” this is somewhat misleading in light of the data from the larger sample.³ When looking at the larger sample (N= 2,475 girls, N=1,514 boys) the data reveal that the lack of interest in leadership is disproportionately a problem among white youth. In fact, the data show that the proportion of youth who think of themselves as leaders is highest among African American girls (75%), African American boys (74%), and Hispanic girls (72%). It is lowest among boys who are white (32%) or Asian American (33%), then among white girls (34%). Given this breakdown of the sample as a whole, the campaign to “ban bossy” seems to be an effort that would benefit young white girls most as that is the group of girls least likely to see themselves as leaders.

Sandberg has enlisted the support of high-profile women of color to promote the “Ban Bossy” campaign. Some of the promotional posters feature a photo of Sheryl Sandberg, flanked by Condoleeza Rice and Anna Maria Chávez. The fact that Sandberg has enlisted some prominent women of color to sign on to her campaign does not change the fact that liberal feminism is consistent with white supremacy. As feminist cultural critic bell hooks writes in her assessment of *Lean In*:

The call for gender equality in corporate America is undermined by the practice of exclusivity, and usurped by the heteronormative white supremacist bonding

³ For the subsample used for the statistic in the promotional material for the campaign, the data on race is not reported but it is for the full sample.

of marriage between white women and men. Founded on the principles of white supremacy and structured to maintain it, the rites of passage in the corporate world mirror this aspect of our nation. Let it be stated again and again that race, and more importantly white supremacy, is a taboo subject in the world according to Sandberg (hooks, 2013).

In Sandberg's corporate-themed liberal feminism there is no apparatus – either in theory or in practice – for dealing with race or racism. As long as these are “taboo subject” for liberal feminists as bell hooks suggests, then liberal feminism will continue to be consistent with white supremacy. The focus in *Lean In* and “Ban Bossy” is on a feminism for women are white, cisgender, heterosexual, married or about to be, middle or upper-middle class, and working in corporations is such a narrow conceptualization of who is a “woman” yet these differences never make a difference for white feminism.

One Billion Rising (OBR)

Eve Ensler is an American playwright most well-known for her play, “The Vagina Monologues” (1994) about the rape and sexual violence. Ensler is also a feminist activist who has launched a number of campaigns intended to raise awareness about violence against women. Ensler's most recent endeavor One Billion Rising (OBR) is an expansion of the V-Day franchise and intended to reach a broader global audience. As Ensler explains: “We founded V-Day, a global movement to stop such violence 16 years ago, and we have had many victories. But still we have not ended the violence. On February 14, 2013 millions of people rose up and danced in 207 countries with our

campaign One Billion Rising” (Enslar 2013). Enslar has received numerous awards, including several honorary doctorate degrees, and admirers of her work point to the millions of dollars raised through V-Day events. A supporter of the One Billion Rising project of worldwide dancing praises it as a “good first step” toward “highlighting a shared problem can encourage the sharing of solutions” (Filopovic, 2013). There is plenty of criticism of Enslar’s work, as well; taken together, these illustrate some of the trouble with white feminism.

There is no account available of why Enslar chose February 14 as the focus for her charitable efforts other than alliteration. The wikipedia entry for Enslar states that “the 'V' in V-Day stands for Victory, Valentine and Vagina.” According to the website for V-Day, “Eve, with a group of women in New York City, established V-Day. Set up as a 501(c)(3) and originally staffed by volunteers, the organization's seed money came from a star-studded, sold out benefit performance at the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York, a show that raised \$250,000 in a single evening.” At the time of Enslar’s inaugural “star-studded, sold out” event, February 14 was already a signifier for the struggle of indigenous women. Since 1990, indigenous and First Nations women in Canada have led marches on February 14 to call attention to the violence against native women. These events, known as the “Memorial March for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women” (shared using the hashtag #MMIW), began as a way to commemorate the murder of an Indigenous woman on Powell Street in Vancouver, Coast Salish Territories. If Enslar’s V-Day had remained a New York City-based event, or even a US-focused event, this confluence of dates might not have been an issue, but V-

Day expanded to Canada. In an “Open Letter to Eve Ensler,” Lauren Chief Elk, a Native American activist, critiqued the organization’s marketing campaign in Canada, writing:

“Your organization took a photo of Ashley Callingbull, and used it to promote V-Day Canada and One Billion Rising, without her consent. You then wrote the word “vanishing” on the photo, and implied that Indigenous women are disappearing, and inherently suggested that we are in some type of dire need of your saving. You then said that Indigenous women were V-Day Canada’s “spotlight”. V-Day completely ignored the fact that February 14th is an iconic day for Indigenous women in Canada, and marches, vigils, and rallies had already been happening for decades to honor the missing and murdered Indigenous women” (Chief Elk, 2013).

In response, Ensler and a spokesperson for OBR said they did not know that there was a conflict with the date, then the spokesperson added, “every date in the calendar has importance.” The move into Canada by Ensler’s organization OBR on a day already commemorated by indigenous women, using the photo of Ashleigh Callingbull without permission, and writing “vanishing” on it, are forms of theft, appropriation and erasure of indigenous women and their activism. Theft, appropriation and erasure are painful to those whose work is being stolen and whose very existence is being erased. Yet, through the lens of white feminism, it is difficult if not impossible to stay focused on indigenous women’s pain of erasure. As Lauren Chief Elk goes on to explain in her Open Letter, “When I told you that your white, colonial, feminism is hurting us, you started

crying. Eve, you are not the victim here.” Theft, appropriation and erasure are key strategies of settler colonialism, a disturbingly consistent feature of OBR.

A central activity of OBR events is dancing. As Ensler explains, “It turns out that dancing, as the women of Congo taught me, is a most formidable, liberating and transformative energy” (Ensler, 2013). However, the some Congolese women do not share Ensler’s enthusiasm for dancing as a response to systematic sexual violence. In a meeting of radical feminist Congolese women, many expressed anger towards One Billion Rising, using words like “insulting” and “neo-colonial” to describe the campaign (Gyte, 2013). One woman pointed out that it would be difficult to imagine a white, middle class, educated, American woman (like Ensler) turning up on the scene of some other kind of atrocity to tell survivors to ‘rise’ above the violence they have seen and experienced by dancing - “imagine someone doing that to holocaust survivors” (Gyte, 2013). Ensler has made several trips to the Democratic Republic of Congo and reported for Western audiences on the use of rape as a weapon of war which may be useful for raising awareness about systematic sexual violence, yet the move to take a Congolese tradition of dance and use it as a campaign strategy for OBR suggests a form of appropriation. This is not an isolate instance.

Following a diagnosis of cancer, Ensler wrote about her experiences a memoir, *In the Body of the World* (2013). The memoir, subtitled, “a memoir of cancer and connection,” is not a typical narrative of disease and recovery, but instead conflates stories of the sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo with her own experience of illness. In a section of the memoir called “Congo Stigmata”, Ensler writes:

“Cells of endometrial (uterine) cancer had created a tumor between the vagina and the bowel and had ‘fistulated’ the rectum. Essentially, the cancer had done exactly what rape had adone to so many thousands of women in the Congo. I ended up having the same surgery as many of them” (Enslar, 2013, p.41).

Here, Enslar equates her cancer with the systematic sexual violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, not because they are similarly situated politically, geographically, or economically, but because she “ended up having the same surgery as many of them”. With the reference to her illness as a “stigmata” Enslar conjures the symbolism of the Christian tradition, with herself either as a Christ figure or saint. The memoir also recounts some of Enslar’s travel to Africa and reflections on her vision of the earth itself, “pillaged and exploited for political and material gain, polluted with its own virulent cancers,” as one reviewer of the book wrote in *The New York Times*. The confluence of Enslar’s assessment of the Democratic Republic of Congo as “the worst situation I’ve seen of women anywhere in the world”⁴ experiencing sexual violence, her characterization of herself in a (white) savior through the evocation of stigmata, her choice of Africa as a destination for finding “a second wind” and embracing “a second life” and as a site for her activism as her “destiny to birth the new paradigm”⁵ that is the impetus for her OBR campaign suggest some of the deep trouble with white feminism. The white feminism of the OBR campaign is rooted in what Toni Morrison refers to as “sycophancy of white identity” in which white writers use Africa as a means

⁴ “A conversation with Eve Enslar: Femicide in the Congo,” *PBS/Lomo*, September 18, 2007. Available online at: http://www.pbs.org/pov/lumo/special_enslar.php.

⁵ “We are the people of the second wind. ... Be part of this collection of molecules that begins somewhere unknown and can’t help but keep rising. Rising. Rising. Rising.” (Enslar, 2013, p.xx)

to contemplate their own terror and desire (Morrison, 1992, p.19). When such critiques are levied at Ensler's work, often by women of color, many white feminists come to her defense to argue that she is "doing good work" and thus, should be released from any obligation to respond to such criticism, as happened recently.⁶ When such a controversy erupts, it is then dismissed as the result of disgruntled, envious or "angry" women of color who are "using" social media to "attack" well-meaning white feminists (Goldberg, 2014). What such a misreading of the situation does is to derail any sustained critique of the architecture of white feminism, such as OBR, or its leading figures, like Ensler. But the question remains: what of the work that has been produced with the millions of dollars raised from V-Day events and OBR?

The kinds of change brought about through Ensler's activism further highlights the trouble with white feminism. In describing what change looks like as a result of OBR, Ensler writes:

"In Guatemala, Marsha Lopez, part of the V-Day movement since 2001, says the most important result of OBR was the creation of a law for the criminalisation of perpetrators who impregnate girls under 14 years old. The law also includes penalties for forced marriage of girls under 18" (Ensler, 2013).

Through the ventriloquy of speaking for and through Marsha Lopez of Guatemala (not identified further in the article), Ensler identifies "criminalization of perpetrators" as the greatest achievement of OBR. Such an approach to systematic sexual violence,

⁶ "Rosie O'Donnell Lashes Out at feminists over 'The Vagina Monologues,'" *The Daily Dot*, February 6, 2015. Available online at: <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/rosie-odonnell-eve-ensler-twitter/>.

which relies primarily on an engagement by the state, does not acknowledge – and indeed cannot conceptualize – the ways that the State is an agent of sexual violence, nor does it acknowledge the ways in which the State enacts violence against some men. This is what Bernstein refers to as carceral feminism, with incarceration as the underlying paradigm for justice (Bernstein, 2014, p.70). The focus on incarceration as a solution to gender inequalities is both insufficient to address the problems of systematic sexual violence (across differences of race, national context and gender identity) and shifts the focus to another system of oppression that in the U.S. consumes the bodies of black and brown men. To be sure, the carceral paradigm of justice is part of the trouble with the white feminism of Ensler’s *One Billion Rising*.

The Future of Online Feminism Report

Digital activism is the most important advance in feminism in fifty years, but it is in crisis and unsustainable. This is the central message of a report released in April 2013 by the Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW). The report, called *The Future of Online Feminism* (using the hashtag #FemFuture), was written by Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti, both involved at different times with the prominent feminist blog Feministing.com. While less widely known than the work of Sandberg or Ensler, the report by Martin and Valenti seemed to encapsulate a set of debates about digital activism; and, as with Sandberg and Ensler, the report illustrates some of the trouble with white feminism.

Martin and Valenti, currently the co-principals of a communications consulting firm, approached BCRW about doing a report on the ‘online revolution’ in feminism. A

key observation of the report is that “feminist blogs the 21st century version of consciousness raising” (Martin & Valenti 2013, p. 3). The 34-page report sets out an overview of what the authors call “online feminism,” by which they mean blogs and online petitions in support of feminist issues. The report was informed by a one-day “convening” of online feminists in June 2012, but it is authored by Martin and Valenti and contains their vision. While they recognize that the emergence of digital technologies has been a boon to feminist causes, Martin and Valenti contend that online feminism is at “a crisis point” because feminist bloggers are not getting paid for their activism, thus making such activism “unsustainable.” But, as the BCRW webpage for the report explains: “Martin and Valenti had a compelling vision to make the landscape of feminist writers and activists online stronger” and they proposed doing this through a variety of tactics.

When it was released, there was an immediate negative reaction to the report voiced largely, but not exclusively, by women of color (Johnson, 2013; Loza, 2014). Many objected to the closed-ended nature of the report, which was released as a PDF document which does not allow for commenting, an ironic choice for a report about the power of the Internet for engaging wide audiences in feminist causes. The hashtag #FemFuture, created by the authors to publicize the report, instead quickly became a mechanism for focused criticism.

Some critics took issue with Martin and Valenti’s historical account of online feminism. In describing the emergence of feminists’ use of the Internet to share stories, raise awareness and organize collective actions, the authors of the report describe it as:

“Yet, its creation was largely accidental. ...Women were quietly creating spaces for themselves, all the while not realizing they were helping to build the next frontier of the feminist movement” (Martin & Valenti, 2013, p.6) Veronica Arreola, who created and maintains the blog *Viva La Feminista*, responded to the report with wide-ranging critique. Specifically, she pointed to her extensive feminist online organizing from the mid-1990s to the present and observes: “None of this was an accident” (Arreola, 2013). Arreola goes on to attribute this mistake to the fact that this is “as a young feminist document” that “plays into the stereotype that no one over 30 is online” and goes on to question who will lead in online feminism.

There is a tension in the report, and the criticisms that followed, between the authorship by Martin and Valenti (two white women) and the racially diverse gathering in June that informed the report. Many of the criticisms of the report saw the invitation-only convening of “a core group of trailblazing feminists working online” as cliquish if not elitist. Martin and Valenti write that “what transpired was no less than historic,” but it is not clear what that was historic about the gathering given the well-established practice of conferences for women bloggers. Although the convening in early June 2012 included a racially diverse group of feminists engaged online – a fact mentioned often to defend the report as inclusive, ultimately the document contains the vision of Martin and Valenti. The authors suggest the possibility of intersectionality when they write that theirs is “boundary-crossing work—cross-generational, cross-class, cross-race, cross just about every line that still divides us both within and outside of the feminist movement” (Martin and Valenti, 2013, p.4). Yet, this is the only mention

of race, generation, or class in the text. However, the report does mention a number of women of color who were included as “examples” of online feminism without being asked permission, or being included in the convening. For many, the process of developing, writing and releasing the report was one that centered elite white women’s experiences while using the presence of women of color – at the convening and in textual examples - to avoid that insinuation. As Susana Loza observes, “The production of the #FemFuture report is emblematic of the white liberal feminist approach to its perceived exclusivity: symbolic multiculturalism” (Loza, 2014).

The trouble with the white feminism of the report is rooted in the ideas, if not quite theories, that inform it. Martin and Valenti write that they were inspired to create a “feminist version” of something called “collective impact”, a model for social change developed by non-profit consultants John Kania and Mark Kramer. The key idea that Martin and Valenti take from this model is that the key to large scale social change is convening power and agenda setting. What make these effective, according to Kania and Kramer, is a “shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions” (Kania and Kramer, 2011). The formidable challenge in trying to create a feminist version of the Kania and Kramer model is finding a “shared vision” among feminists that includes a “common understanding of the problem.” It may be that Martin and Valenti believed that they had arrived at this based on the convening of twenty-one “trailblazing” feminists, but they did not, indeed could not, with such a small group however diverse or well intentioned. Instead, Martin and Valenti proceeded with the “convening power”

and “agenda setting” without the shared vision and this, in many ways, illustrates some of the trouble with white feminism.

The crisis that the report identifies among feminist online activists is primarily an economic one, with affective peril a close second. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the solutions Martin and Valenti offer include a wide-range of tactics and strategies to make feminist blogging economically lucrative and more emotionally satisfying. Some of the proposed solutions include sponsoring a “Feminist Business Boot Camp” (a weeklong opportunity to learn about business and financial structures and examine social business case studies), “Corporate Partnerships” (not every corporation’s mission and operations would fit within the ethical and political framework that many online feminists demand of our partners), and “Self-Care & Solidarity Retreats” (order to reconnect with renewed purpose and clarity). The proposed solutions in the report are a combination of economic empowerment and emotional uplift, with an ambitious overall goal: “We must create a new culture of work, a vibrant and valued feminist economy that could resolve an issue that’s existed for waves before us” (Martin and Valenti, 2013, p.23).

In many ways, what Martin and Valenti are proposing is a well-trodden path in the world of women’s blogging conferences, most notably the *Blogher* franchise. At these blogging conferences, which began in 2005 to highlight the work of women bloggers, thousands of predominantly (though not exclusively) white women come together looking for emotional support and for ways to “monetize” – make money from - their blogs. Although not explicitly a form of feminist organizing, there is a kind

of women's empowerment ethos to these conferences. Reporters from *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have covered the *BlogHer* conferences, and yet the whiteness of women's blogging conferences is rarely remarked upon by the mainstream media. However, the racial composition of these conferences is set in relief when contrasted with the *Blogalicious* conference, developed and attended by African American women; there is also stark difference in sponsorship between the two conferences. Research on sponsorship at these conferences from 2007-2009 found that there were consistently over 40 sponsors at *BlogHer*, many of them corporations like GM (who provided cars for attendees), and some of the top tech firms, while there were fewer than 10 sponsors at *Blogalicious*, many of these were small or single proprietor businesses (Daniels, 2011). The top women bloggers who are touted as financial success stories at *BlogHer* are almost always white (e.g., Heather Armstrong, a well-known 'mommy blogger' is a millionaire), while women of color bloggers talk about the struggle to attract sponsorship for their blogs. This stark difference speaks to the racialized political economy in which white women earn more than African American, Native American and Latina women; this includes income earned from doing work online, like blogging for feminist causes. What Martin and Valenti miss in their proposed "new culture of work, a vibrant and valued feminist economy" is the way that race still matters in the economy. In contrast to some in the "waves that came before," who might have been critical of the idea of feminism joined seamlessly with capitalism, the Martin and Valenti report, like the women's blogging conferences, embraces the idea of a corporate-sponsored feminism. And this fits very neatly with white feminism.

DISCUSSION

There are a number of challenges with discussing white feminism. For women of color, the initial challenge is simply being heard, as they are frequently ignored. Once their voices have registered, they risk being bullied and verbally abused (or worse). Most likely they will be called “angry”, or in some cases, accused of starting a “war” (Goldberg, 2014). These misreadings of critique as attack cause white women to further retreat from engaging about race and may even lead them to excluding women of color from feminist organizing in order to avoid even the possibility of criticism. For white women, like myself, speaking out about white feminism is to risk losing connection with white women – and the opportunities that come with that - and hurt feelings. Even as I was writing this piece, I could not keep from my mind the white women I know who might be upset by my writing this. To speak about white feminism, then, is to speak against a social order.

When Mikki Kendall’s hashtag #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen was trending, many white feminists reporting feeling hurt, attacked, wounded, or simply left out of the conversation (Van Deven, 2013). In many ways, the reaction to challenges to white feminism causes “unhappiness” which, as Sara Ahmed explains, can be a good thing:

“To be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order, a happiness order is to be willing to cause unhappiness, even if unhappiness is not your cause. To be willing to cause unhappiness might be about how we live an individual life (not to choose “the right path” is readable as giving up the happiness that is presumed to follow that path). ...To be willing to cause

unhappiness can also be how we immerse ourselves in collective struggle, as we work with and through others who share our points of alienation. Those who are unseated by the tables of happiness can find each other.” (Ahmed, 2010)

As I read it, Ahmed’s is a hopeful analysis for those who seek to challenge white feminism. For those who are willing to cause unhappiness by challenging white feminism we can find each other as we work together and share our alienation from it.

The era of digital activism presents new opportunities for digital feminism, at the same time the intersectional Internet makes challenging hegemonic white feminism easier and more effective. Twitter, in particular, is changing the landscape of feminism. Loza notes that the proliferation of hashtags created by feminists of color with intersectional themes and observes “these hashtags are a direct indictment of the parochial vision of online feminism articulated in the #FemFuture report” (Loza, 2014). And Mikki Kendall agrees: “I do know 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 Vasquez, 2013). If the goal is a sustained critique of white feminism, then we have to see Twitter as a key tool in that effort.

To sustain a challenge to white feminism, we have to become more adept at critically examining whiteness. At many feminist blogs, as it is elsewhere in the sociopolitical landscape, when race is addressed, it is nearly always raised by a person of color (de la Peña, 2010, p. 926). Challenging white feminism means, at the very least, bringing up race and recognizing that white people have race. To go further, we must

understand the ways that constructing and protecting whiteness has been a core feature in the rise of the popular Internet (de la Peña, 2010, p. 936), and we must join this with a dissection of how white feminism has benefitted from this technological development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I discussed three case studies of white feminism that were widely circulated in popular culture in recent years. The focus in Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* and "Ban Bossy" is on women and girls doing the motivational work necessary to assert themselves in the workplace and think of themselves as leaders from an early age. While Sandberg admits she is new to feminism, her ideas are in sync with the tenets of liberal feminism. Sandberg's vision of the world is one in which all the women are white, cisgender, heterosexual, married or about to be, middle or upper-middle class, and working in corporations, in other words, they are like her. Sandberg's experiences as a woman become the stand-in for all women's experiences, and this is some of the trouble with white feminism. Although Sandberg includes some prominent women of color in her promotional materials for "Ban Bossy," her brand of liberal feminism does nothing to challenge white supremacy, but instead is quite consistent with it.

The V-Day and One Billion Rising campaigns created by playwright Eve Ensler have raised millions for awareness about sexual violence, yet have been criticized for theft, erasure and neo-colonial practices with regard to indigenous and Native women. Her conflation of her own cancer with the experience of survivors of rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and her use of the phrase "Congo Stigmata" to describe

her illness, point to problematic white savior rhetoric and politics within Ensler's work. The policy emphasis of One Billion Rising on the "incarceration of perpetrators" completely elides the way that the State is implicated in systematic violence, including sexual violence. The focus on carceral justice is a key part of the trouble with white feminism.

The BCRW report, *The Future of Online Feminism*, repeats some of the old trouble with white feminism from previous waves and presents some new ones. The reports authors, Martin and Valenti, published a report that was supposedly based on a shared vision of what the future of online feminism might look like, but they did so based mostly on their own experiences as white feminists and in consultation with a gathering of twenty-one racially diverse feminist bloggers. The report met with immediate and heated criticism on the hashtag #FemFuture, much of it for the thoroughly closed way the report was developed, written and released which is anathema to those used to the open web. Their lack of technological transparency and accountability is a new kind of trouble with white feminism. Martin and Valenti proposed a set of economic and affective strategies to bring about a new, creative, feminist economy, but they proposed these without taking into account the way race matters in the political economy, a very old kind of trouble with white feminism.

Taken together, Sandberg's *Lean In* and "Ban Bossy," Eve Ensler's V-Day and OBR, and *The Future of Online Feminism* report reveal some of the dominance of white women as architects and defenders of a framework of feminism in the digital era.

Challenging white feminism in favor of an intersectional feminism that centers the experiences of black, Latina, Asian, Indigenous, queer, disabled, and trans women, is to speak against a social order. To challenge white feminism is also to risk causing unhappiness, but this is a risk we must take so that we can find each other in our resistance to it.

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