# Bringing Race into Feminist Digital Media Studies

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As our mediated lives become increasingly digitized, we must continue to modify and adapt our understanding of feminism in response—both in the ways that feminist politics and identities are taken up within online environments, and in the way that feminism can help us shape our understanding of the digital. Much of the earliest feminist theorization of digital networks and technologies coalesced under the term "cyberfeminism." Such works are premised on the reality that women are actively participating on digital platforms in ways that collectively subvert patriarchal norms and practices.

Although the use of the prefix "cyber-" has gone out of favor, there is an abundance of scholarship dating from the mid-1990s that tackles the complicated role of gendered identities and experiences in the digital realm. Donna Haraway's seminal *A Cyborg Manifesto* (2000) uses the metaphor of the cyborg, who is part human and part machine, as a way of using technological advances to break down the familiar binaries and boundaries that surround categories such as "woman" and "machine."

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While Haraway's postmodern take on the need for deconstructing identity in advanced capitalism has inspired a groundswell of writing on cyberfeminism; it has also been criticized for its overly optimistic treatment of identities such as race and disability (Fernandez 2002; Kafer 2013). The complicated intersectional experiences of women of color, among other axes of minority identities, are often neglected or treated too glibly within cyberfeminist discourse and discussions of technology more broadly. Carolyn de la Peña specifically points to the way that historians of technology have become much more adept at discussing gender, but have continued to address race far less frequently for the past twenty years (de la Peña 2010).

This blind spot mirrors the history of feminism itself, as second-wave feminists were criticized for primarily centering the experiences of white women and failing to take women of color into consideration. Scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill Collins (1990; Collins and Bilge, 2016), and bell hooks (1981) put forward theories of intersectionality that called attention to the fact that anti-racism and anti-sexism needed to take place at the same time, rather than relying upon narrow modes of activism that did not fully address the multiple ways in which discrimination and oppression were experienced. All identities are intersectional in the sense of embodying a complex array of gender, race, class, religious, sexual, and other categories of identity, but intersectional approaches demand an accounting for the privilege that some bodies possess—particularly when that privilege has systematically served to directly disadvantage others. Much of this theorization has emerged alongside the development of black feminism as a specific branch of the feminist movement that recognizes the specificity and uniqueness of black women's experiences and interlocking oppressions, while also acknowledging the diverse array of shifting privileges and disadvantages that structure individual lives.

Yet intersectionality itself has had its critics as well (Puar 2012; Salem 2013), with some arguing that it is often deployed in ways that reify the position of white women as the foundation from which all forms of difference radiate outward. As such, black women and Third World women become homogenized and overdetermined as the always-Other. While such critiques often fail to consider the full depth of intersectional analyses and their later developments, there are certainly other useful metaphors for considering diverse populations. Jasbir Puar (2012) puts forward Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "assemblages" as a way around this problem, given that assemblages focus less on specific bodies and more on

the relationships between them, constantly reconfiguring their connections. As she states, "intersectionality attempts to comprehend political institutions and their attendant forms of social normativity and disciplinary administration, while assemblages, in an effort to reintroduce politics into the political, asks what is prior to and beyond what gets established" (63). Doing so can help to consider the way that space and time play a role in the constant reorganization of our social formations.

This perspective on the fluidity and mobility of identity is quite useful in then reconsidering the way that digital forms of feminism can more fully serve to destabilize hegemonic whiteness. Indeed, digital networking technologies and online forms of communication are distinguished by their ability to transcend boundaries with their potentially non-hierarchical structure that allows for connections to be created between participants from different standpoints. Online networks are flexible and adaptive, built across constantly shifting nodes rather than a centralized or static power hierarchy (Castells 2010). This is not to say that digital communication offers a utopian space that is somehow free from systems of domination; on the contrary, familiar systems of oppression such as patriarchy, racism, and homophobia continue to structure online communities in every way imaginable. Communities who are disenfranchised in traditional modes of mass communication often remain so online, with digital divides persisting in ways that can limit access, digital literacy, leadership roles, and visibility. Moreover, women and people of color are often subject to brutal attacks online for simply participating, as we have seen in the misogynistic and racist attacks surrounding incidents such as the so-called GamerGate (a controversy surrounding video game cultures that resulted in misogynistic digital attacks), or the hateful speech directed at black actress Leslie Jones on Twitter. Nonetheless, the internet still provides a wealth of resources for extending and enhancing opportunities for communication, and in particular, for strengthening overlapping and interconnected movements for feminism and anti-racism to come together.

The work of feminist rhetoric scholars can provide further insight into how digital feminists can engage in breaking down these problematic constructs. Aimee Carillo Rowe (2008) and Karma Chavez (2013) both foreground race in their theorizing of transracial alliances and feminist coalitions without relying exclusively upon intersectionality. Rowe analyzes the transformative power of transracial alliances between straight white women and women of color in the academy, arguing that what she calls a "politics of relation" foregrounds the building of affective ties as a

means of collective empowerment. In starting from the affective connections that draw us together, we can hold ourselves accountable to those with different levels of privilege and move away from our individual locations. Chavez examines spaces of convening as coalitional moments, or "when political issues coincide or merge in the public sphere in ways that create space to reenvision and potentially reconstruct rhetorical imaginaries" (8). For both, there is a focus on the nexus of spatial and temporal alignment—moments of possibility that are necessarily contextually bound, and thus temporary—that nonetheless provide the integral building blocks for sustained activism and eventual social change. Chavez further theorizes "radical interactionality" as a mode of resistance that attacks the roots of oppression by highlighting the "complicated and dynamic way in which identities, power, and systems of oppression intermesh, interlock, intersect, and thus interact" (58)—moving away from the more fixed and linear model of the intersection.

Although Chavez and Rowe are interested in rhetorical analysis and do not apply their thinking to digitally constituted activism, their theories help us to productively shift discussions of feminism in digital networks away from merely asking if digital feminism has been successful or not. In many ways, scholarship on activism and feminism in the digital realm has become fixated on asking about the potential limitations versus the affordances and opportunities brought about by technological advances. While such studies can illuminate powerful insights (Daniels 2009), they stop short of considering the relationships between individual campaigns and the transformative potential for sustained engagement. We already know that no single activist intervention is without flaws or blind spots—whether it is a hashtag campaign like #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen (in which solidarity between different feminist identities was called out for not including people of color within its activism), a viral meme such as "Binders Full of Women" (following Republican candidate Mitt Romney's awkward and demeaning comment during a 2012 presidential debate about how many women applied to work in his office), or an app for documenting street harassment or mapping racism. On its own, every intervention is premised on a specific set of strategies and tactics that necessarily exclude certain uses and outcomes. Yet the question remains as to whether or not we can build a model for exploring the way that the temporary alliances and feminist coalitions forged through these activist uses of digital media can extend beyond transitory moments, even in their invariably limited capacity. How is it that feminist forms of anti-racism and anti-racist forms of feminism are producing something that is more resilient than the outcome of any individual campaign? Beyond rhetorical analysis, there is an opportunity for media studies and digital studies scholars to investigate the formation of coalitions that mirror the network itself in producing ties that are flexible and durable, able to facilitate responses in complex and dispersed ways.

In pushing toward these kinds of inquiries, we can also expand beyond the black/white binary that circumscribes so much discussion of race in the United States. While black feminism has been absolutely foundational in bringing questions of race to the fore within feminist communities, there is need for more complex continued work in the way that Asian Pacific Islander American, Latino/a and Chicano/a, Arab American, Native American, and mixed race communities are also engaging in anti-racist and feminist activism. The interconnected nodes of online communication mirror this complexity, offering opportunities for participation that are directed toward specific campaigns but also produce new affiliations, communities of practice, and heterogeneous alliances.

Just to point to a few examples of the way that such analysis might be fruitful, we could consider the various ways in which #BlackLivesMatter activism has developed in relation to feminist communities—such as the herstory posted online by founder Alicia Garza condemning the theft of black women's work, or the "Hands Off Black Women" movement originating from Madison, Wisconsin. Also important are the multiracial articulations created through "APIs for Black Lives Matter" or the Black Lives Matter policy platform focusing on immigrant rights and fighting deportations, which links the struggles of blacks and Latinos. Each of these interventions has its own temporality and life cycle, rising to visibility via the spread of linked social media posts and contributing to digital discourse and debates. We might then be tempted to analyze any one of these moments as a discrete or finite occurrence. Yet the digital discourse that proliferates and constitutes such coalitional moments, as well as the participants who are hailed and activated as a result, do not necessarily disperse and disappear. If we recognize each as nodes within the digital network, we can more productively trace their evolution and rearticulation—the ways in which their discourses and participants become reactivated in new configurations, or through developing other activist interventions. In doing so, we can more clearly see the way that digital platforms and their affordances help evade some of the concerns about the fixing of intersectionality in only limited configurations. On the contrary,

constituencies representing heterogeneous affiliations are also viable nodes within the same network, which is marked by a fluidity and flexibility that resists concretization.

In considering the broader trajectories of the way that anti-racism and feminism take place online, I also ask feminist scholars to consider how we can view contemporary activist interventions through a more historical lens. That is, rather than immediately attempting to address the individual successes and failures of recently proliferating phenomena, I invite researchers to make connections between today's viral flashpoints and the cultural movements and contexts in which they play a larger role. Scholars of new media often feel pressure to address the latest item that is blowing up their feed, particularly when it seems to represent an exciting new political formation. Academic conferences are rife with presentations on the latest viral event and its rich outpouring of discourse. Yet doing so can fail to accommodate this broader perspective, which demands considering the afterlives of activist interventions and the connections drawn across, between, and around what may indeed be a productive coalition or temporary alliances. In considering the historical debates around the way that identities such as race and gender have come together in activist interventions, it may be possible to extend our analyses forward and backward alongside the vast contours of the digital network.

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