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Chapter One

A Sign of the Times

Hashtag Feminism as a Conceptual Framework

Tara L. Conley

INTRODUCTION

Story of the Question

Over the years I have often been asked if I believe online activism is "real." To this day, I find that question jarring because it suggests that organizing work like building coalitions, issue amplification, and storytelling, which provide context for social and political movements, lack merit simply because these practices are digitally mediated. Even before writing about #RenishaMcBride, I always believed that activist and feminist practices can and should take many forms (2013a; 2014a). Though addressing this question is exhausting, it has led me to examine how discourse emerges and what it communicates about the social, political, and cultural contexts in which we live. As a result of looking closely at online organizing and storytelling over the years, I have come to an understanding about the relationship between discourse and practice, and the technologies that carry them across time and space. This chapter reflects years of mulling over this relationship and presents a culmination of my work that describes hashtag feminism as a conceptual framework.

Hashtag feminism describes another enunciation for how to frame feminist theory and practice beginning in the aughts. Hashtags point to things. They locate. They organize information and people. They document. They reflect ever changing language and discourse. The hashtag marks ideas, practices, and ideologies across time and space where one can also locate the politics of representation, the ideological underpinnings of technological

infrastructures, and our response to these aspects of social life in the public sphere. Hashtags are sites of becoming (Conley 2017). They are shorthand, sometimes to a fault. #MeToo, for example, is so embedded in popular discourse that its origin story is often lost. The story of #MeToo, as told through white liberal media, begins with Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, actress Alyssa Milano, and journalist Ronan Farrow, not with community organizer Tarana Burke, who many years before exposés and tweets sat down with a small group of Black girls and listened to their stories about sexual abuse (Burke n.d.; Me Too Movement 2018; Conley 2018). The more I analyze these moments, the more I see how origin stories around activism and organizing, or "moments of authoring" attached to prominent hashtags get lost overtime (Gray 2013, 108). And yet, this is precisely how language plays out. Language travels and morphs. Language takes work. So too does indexing language reflected in hashtag discourse. I believe the significance of hashtag feminism lies in its utility: While it arguably stands for a type of feminist moniker for the Internet age, more importantly, hashtag feminism points to a corpus of feminist discourse, practices, and ethos that reflect people's everyday lives as well as the tensions that exist around ideas about "how communities ought to be" (Ott 2018).

This chapter examines hashtag feminism according to three constructs: as discourse, as embodied practice, and as ideology. First, in fleshing out an understanding of hashtag feminism-as-discourse (HFAD), I analyze a corpus of digital feminist scholarship along with the website I founded in 2013, Hashtag Feminism, including its blog posts and infographics from 2014–2017. Second, I analyze hashtag feminism-as-embodied-practice (HFAEP) by examining the feminist storytelling and organizing project of #MeToo. I examine these practices through the concept of *homo narrans*, or the storytelling species. This idea comes from Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter, who acknowledges that "the human is not only a languaging being but also a storytelling species, a *bios/mythoi*" (McKittrick 2015, 25). Lastly, I conceptualize hashtag feminism-as-ideology (HFAI) as a set of beliefs and values among competing solidarities across contested feminist landscapes.

To carry out this analysis, I begin with a brief literature review on hashtag studies and then move to a cultural history of hashtag feminism, which informs my understanding of hashtag feminism as an intellectual project. I then examine hashtag feminism according to the three themes outlined above. André Brock's critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) influences my approach to explicating hashtag feminism as an "assemblage of artifacts, practices, and cultural beliefs" (2018, 1014). This triadic formulation helps carry out a hermeneutic analysis where culture is positioned as a technological artifact, a view I accept. (Brock 2018, 1016). To conclude, I

offer a vision of hashtag feminism as an intellectual project and praxis of our time, one that espouses a Black feminist ethos for justice and liberation.

Hashtag Studies

Research on social tagging and hashtags as sites of analysis to examine culture and society has been a busy space for over a decade. This is expected, since the more hashtags (metadata) are used to locate cultural practices and language (data) across the Internet, the more questions arise for scholars about how to capture and analyze this information as part of our collective memory. In particular, *hashtag activism*, *hashtag feminism*, and *digital feminism* are perhaps the most recognized terms to come out of this scholarship. These terms have been formalized through peer-reviewed research to describe the role hashtags play in documenting social and political life, and in theorizing about power. This body of literature examines modes of activism and feminist practices, namely how Twitter hashtags locate activist campaigns, organize online communities, and amplify social movements.

A more established approach to the study of hashtags comes out of sociolinguistics and corpus studies. This body of literature has been at the forefront of examining social tagging and semiotic mechanisms of hashtags for some time. These studies provide some of the earliest and most exhaustive explanations of social tagging on Twitter, primarily highlighting linguistic metafunctions that point to conversational or "searchable talk," spoken linguistics, and affiliation patterns (Bruns and Stieglitz 2012; Zappavigna 2012, 2015; Zhu 2016; Scott 2018). Research coming out of this area also provides historical frameworks for examining social tagging on Twitter and other social media platforms that predate Twitter (Ames and Naaman 2007; Keho and Gee 2011). Related studies in this field consider hashtags as sites to examine diffusion and emergence in online communities, looking at predictive aspects of hashtags, and the messages they carry overtime (Bastos, Raimundo, and Travitzki 2013; Fox, Cruz, and Lee 2015).

The turn to formalize research about the role hashtags play in movements for gender and racial justice crystalized in 2014 when the academic journal *Feminist Media Studies* published its first special issue on feminist hashtags and Twitter activism, of which my work is part. During the summer of 2014, editors of the *Feminist Media Studies* special issue sent out a call for short essays that reflected on some of the most visible feminist hashtags of the year. By the time these essays were published, stories about hashtag activism had been well covered across the mainstream press and written about in academic press. However, this issue was the first of its kind entirely devoted to reflections on the use of feminist hashtags to "respon[d] to contemporary events and discussions" (Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 2014, 1090). Included in the issue are 14 short pieces that reflect on trending hashtags

framed in a transnational context across the United States, Turkey, United Kingdom, and Nigeria. The commentary structure was meant to be short, pithy, and accessible to mirror discourse on Twitter. Though not all trending feminist hashtags were captured in this issues, among those that were included are (Portwood-Stacer and Berridge, 2014b): #AskThicke; #BringBackOurGirls; #RenishaMcBride; #NotBuyingIt; #YesAllWomen; #Direnkahkaha; #OPRollRedRoll and #OccupySteubenville; #EndFathersDay; #YourSlipIsShowing, #MyStealthyFreedom; #KadınKatliamıVar and #TransCinayetleriPolitiktir; #TheVagenda.

Also during this year, Kitsy Dixon published "Feminist online identity: Analyzing the presence of hashtag feminism," in the *Journal of Arts and Humanities* (2014). Alongside this article and the *Feminist Media Studies* special issue, *Ada: A Journal of Gender New Media & Technology* published its fifth issue on Queer Feminist Media Praxis that included an article by Susana Loza (2014) on "Hashtag feminism, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and the other #Femfuture." These articles and special issues mark some of the first scholarly nods to hashtag feminism and hashtag activism as emerging areas of scholarly inquiry. For instance, Dixon and Loza's articles cite early case studies (most notably #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen) and the platforms used to engage in feminist praxis across social media, like Tumblr and LiveJournal. Dixon's article, in particular, explores definitions and theories used to explain feminist praxis online. Loza's article takes a more cultural historical approach to explore early feminist praxis, while highlighting the role feminists of color played in "(re)forming mainstream American feminism."

One of the earliest and most widely cited scholarly articles on feminist hashtag activism comes from Sherri Williams' "Digital defense: Black feminists resist violence with hashtag activism," which is part of the 2015 *Feminist Media Studies* second issue. Williams examines Black women's use of Twitter hashtags to advocate for survivors of sexual assault and reframe messages about Black women as victims of sexual assault. Williams considers the use of Twitter hashtags as a media savvy approach to activism. Williams writes: "Black feminists' use of hashtag activism is a unique fusion of social justice, technology, and citizen journalism" (343). Williams considers Black feminism as a strategic approach to spark social action online and offline through digitally born content.

A relatively nascent body of literature considers the technical utility of hashtags and the digital geographic landscapes where hashtags emerge. This literature sets out to examine technology as ideology. These perspectives, typically coming out of code studies, STS (science and technology studies), critical race studies, and digital geography studies, interrogate how beliefs and ideologies are reinscribed through digital artifacts and platforms (Sharma 2013; Brock 2012, 2018). They frame non-visual dimensions of code, in this

case U+0023 (the Unicode character for the hashtag), as actors in reconstituting social difference and undermining systems of power (Conley 2017; Elwood and Leszczynski 2018). These perspectives argue that technology platforms and artifacts like hashtags *do* things, they are not neutral.

Perhaps the most burgeoning body of work on hashtags examines publics and counterpublics, and the use of content analysis and social network analysis as primary methodological techniques. Some of this work includes examining, for instance: the socio-political practice of hashtag(ging); the role of hashtags in building and amplifying feminist and anti-racist movements; hashtags as sites to locate affinity spaces; and hashtags as modes of storytelling (Khoja-Moolji 2015; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2016; Yang 2016; Walton and Oyewuwo-Gassikia 2017; Kuo 2018; Myles 2018; Conley 2019; Jackson, Foucault Welles, and Bailey 2020). This work spans various disciplines and industries.

Overall, this body of literature offers valuable insights for scholars concerned with the future direction of hashtag research. As more scholarship on hashtags is produced, more questions about methods for capturing data and metadata across platforms will undoubtedly emerge.

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF HASHTAG FEMINISM

Hashtag feminism, as a concept and practice does not exist independent of other discursive forms relative to digital culture in the aughts. Before hashtag feminism and Twitter, Black feminist bloggers were theorizing, organizing, and telling stories across digital spaces like Culture Kitchen, Crunk Feminist Collective, Racialicious, African Diaspora, Ph.D., Diaspora Hypertext, to name a few (Johnson 2013; Bailey and Gumbs 2010). Hashtag feminism also shares a unique history with another like-term, hashtag activism. In 2011, the term "hashtag activism" was coined by journalist Eric Augenbraun from the *Guardian* to describe the #OccupyWallStreet movement. Around this time, people had already been using hashtag vernacular across public discourse. In 2012, *Ms. Magazine* published an article, "Future of Feminism: The Hashtag is Mightier Than the Sword," that signaled a shift towards a new(er) lexicon for feminist activism online and by way of social media (Scott). Other like terms such as Twitter Feminism, an idea amplified by Canadian feminist, and polarizing figure for her transphobic views, Megan Murphy as a critique of online feminism, also signaled toward this new(er) turn. But even before users began to associate online feminist activism with Twitter, hashtags like #fem2 and #femfuture appeared on the platform in 2008 and 2009, respectively, as a way to organize and locate feminist issues and conversations. Early feminist hashtag vernacular finds its roots in feminist blogging and

online advocacy work that called out misogyny, misogynoir, and rape culture purported across mainstream media.

Around the same time when hashtag activism and hashtag feminism were becoming recognized, albeit contested forms of activism and feminist practice, data analysis and mining companies saw the potential in profiting from hashtag data. In 2013, Topsy, a free analytics search platform, was available to everyday users to search hashtag data. At the time, it was relatively feasible to locate the origin stories of social movement discourse, political protests, and advocacy campaigns, as well as to map diffusion and trajectories of hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen across Twitter. After Apple acquired Topsy in 2015, the platform disappeared, and so did the ability for everyday users to freely explore metadata on Twitter. Topsy was only gone briefly, however. Once analytics companies recognized the profitability of mining and analyzing hashtag data, services like Topsy reappeared, but at-cost.

Fee-for-service hashtag analytics platforms posed challenges for researchers conducting mixed method analyses to examine critical social issues. If researchers did not manually collect tweets in Excel sheets or if they lacked the technical skills to mine hashtag data on their own using Twitter's API[1] then paying for hashtag data analytics was, and continues to be, a more feasible option. The black box conundrum is when data analytics services use their own algorithms and methods to mine data that customers cannot see (Littman 2017). This presents problems for Internet researchers concerned about ethical data collection, the accuracy of mined data, access to historical metadata, and terms of service. When researchers are unable to collect, assess, study, and create repositories for hashtag data, the loss of discurvise histories become apparent. Indeed, the political economy of mining hashtag data is an under-examined area of research that deserves more attention. That said, however, even with the help of platforms, services, and collaborators, questions about the origins of hashtags, attribution for hashtags, and about how hashtags have been used across time and space remain contested. For this reason, as a feminist researcher and mediamaker, I believed it necessary to build a web platform where I could archive digital feminist culture on my own terms.

In mid-December of 2013, roughly a week before Beyoncé released her surprise digital album that told her story about embracing a feminist identity, I was designing a WordPress website called Hashtag Feminism. I wanted the website to house social commentary about digital activism and popular culture led by Black women and women of color on Twitter, and to collect data that would document moments of authoring around a new(er) enunciation of feminism in the Twitter age. Several months prior, hashtags like #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen (created by Mikki Kendall), #SolidarityIsForBlackMen (created by Jamilah Lemieux), and #NotYourAsianSidekick (created by

Suey Park) went viral and were making national and international headlines. More and more Black women and women of color were publicly calling out the failures of white feminism in the digital age. They were sharing stories about racialized gender violence, and speaking out against erasure in social movements that proclaimed racial justice and gender equality. Also at this time, I was working on a case study about the impact of online organizing led by Black women in response to the murder of 19-year-old Renisha McBride in Dearborn Heights, Michigan (2013a). Looking back, I consider 2013 the year Black women and women of color mediamakers, storytellers, activists, organizers trended. It was a watershed moment for feminist discourse and practice; an origin story that was, for better or worse, fervently documented by Black women and women of color using hashtags.

At present, there appears to be a rhetorical shift to move beyond hashtags in effort to re-center people and community practices in the study of the digital (Florini 2019; Jordan-Zachery and Harris 2019). To be clear, in offering a conceptual framework for hashtag feminism, I do so in order to center people, namely Black women and girls, in an analysis of digital culture while emphasizing that the technological processes for archiving digital and networked cultures are not neutral. The shift to move beyond the rhetoric of hashtags is not so much a gesture towards a *post-hashtag* era in the sense of anti-hashtag discourse, but rather, it appears to be a move to pause, reflect, and further explore hashtags as part of a broader network of communication technologies and sociality. Scholars continue to be critical of neoliberal and techno-utopian discourses that position technologies and *the digital* as neutral and egalitarian. The notion of "beyond the hashtag" also signals a shift away from an exclusive focus on the discursive function of hashtag (and creators) to consider the history of technologies and cybercultures, and social practices. This era of scholarship looks back at watershed moments like 2013, for example, in efforts to formulate newer understandings about theory, praxis, and language.

In the following sections, I analyze hashtag feminism as a conceptual framework through an in depth examination of discursive forms, practices, and ideological underpinnings. I take cues from Brock's seminal work on Black Twitter and his method, Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (2012; 2018; 2020)—which enhances decoding-as-method (Conley 2017)—in efforts to unearth a complex assemblage for articulating hashtag feminism.

HASHTAG FEMINISM-AS-DISCOURSE (HFAD)

www.hashtagfeminism.com

In her chapter, "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poiesis" Jamaican writer and cultural theorist, Sylvia Wynter writes,

> [t]o be effective, systems of power must be discursively legitimated. This is not to say that power is originally a set of institutional structures that are subsequently legitimated. On the contrary, it is to suggest the equiprimordiality of structure and cultural conceptions in the genesis of power. (65)

Here, Wynter provides insight into the conceptual utility of discourse and its relationship to institutions. Namely, discourse functions as a concept to describe how modes of language are tangled up in relations of power and representation. Wynter's assertion that systems of power legitimize discourse, and discourse legitimizes systems of power through structural and cultural conceptions provides a basis for this section that maps the website Hashtag Feminism (www.hashtagfeminism.com). For this section, I approach the concept of discourse in a way that "focus[es] on representation within and of technology," since technology is a political process for reproducing and re-presenting social hierarchies (Brock 2018, 1016).

Hashtag feminism-as-discourse (HFAD) describes the makeup of discursive forms that characterize a feminist ethos beginning in the aughts. HFAD considers how people engage in ideas of feminism online and considers the role web platforms and indexing processes play in reproducing feminist discourse. Myles (2018) also considers hashtag feminism from a discursive standpoint: "[A]pprehending hashtag feminism from a discursive standpoint makes sense, as it gives new opportunities to understand how citizens engage 'in acts of political creativity, negotiation, dialogue, and productive disagreement' (Shaw, 2016: 3) by enacting both the physical and digital affordances of a myriad of technologies, objects and spaces" (511). In other words, considering hashtag feminism from a discurvise standpoint provides a way to examine the relationship between popular cultural discourse and the technologies that carry discourse across time and space. I have been acutely aware of this relationship as a feminist mediamaker, insomuch as it influenced my approach to build www.hashtagfeminism.org.

The website Hashtag Feminism marks an origin story that represents how communities on Twitter took up feminist issues across national and transnational contexts. The technological aspects of Hashtag Feminism, such as the Wordpress development platform, the HTML codes used to design the platform, and the use of tagging to code content throughout the platform reproduced modes of sociality that first appeared on Twitter. From 2013–2015,

Hashtag Feminism functioned as a corpus of metadata and data that housed metrics and content, including hashtags that located feminist conversations, organizing, and storytelling online. It was also a space for feminist writers to provide commentary about hashtags that garnered national and international attention, such as for example, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #NotYourAsianSidekick (Conley 2013c).

In 2013 and 2014, I produced two informal analyses on the top feminist hashtags of the year. In 2013, I noted that for each hashtag highlighted, they represented their "own unique entry into conversations dealing with race, gender, sexuality, economic justice, global citizenship, and Ms. Yoncé Carter" (Conley 2013c). At the time, I monitored the top hashtags as determined by Topsy and Keyhole analytics platforms, and also looked at top trends on Twitter and news coverage during a 30-day period. The top hashtags of 2013 were not without social context, as indicated by my informal reference to Beyoncé Knowles Carter, who released her self-titled album that included a sample from Nigerian feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie declaring a feminist identity. The design aesthetics of Beyoncé's album, with its black background and bright pink knockout font, influenced the design aesthetics of Hashtag Feminism's website (see figure 1.1 and figure 1.2).

On the surface, it would appear as if feminism was rebranded in 2013. However, I consider 2013 the year when feminist discourse emerged as a strategy to shape popular cultural discourse whilst struggles for representation and visibility were increasingly scrutinized. This is not to suggest that feminist discourse has not been scrutinized in the public sphere before. It is to say, however, that 2013 marks an origin story when racialized feminist discourse went viral through digitization and strategies of diffusion. For example, users employed an indexing process (the hashtag) to archive a message (e.g., white feminism's constant betrayal towards Black women), the framing of that message (e.g. #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen), and the spread of the message across contexts and platforms. Further, I write (2013d), "[t]hat #NotYourAsianSidekick appeared in *Time*, Al Jazeera America, ABC, and BBC, and that #solidarityisforwhitewomen and #solidarityisforblackmen appeared on NPR, among other outlets, might indicate that broader audiences are paying more attention to our stories than ever before." Portwood-Stacer and Berridge (2014a) further articulate this phenomenon:

> Hashtags specifically related to feminist causes, like #YesAllWomen, #BringBackOurGirls, and #Direnkahkaha, are invoked by social media users worldwide in response to contemporary events and discussions. At their most visible, these terms and their spread are taken up by newspapers, television, and other media outlets as stories of collective public opinion and, sometimes, further action. (1090)

Figure 1.1. Original Hashtag Feminism webpage from December 23, 2013. Screenshot from The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, https://www.archive.org/web/20140902183109/http://www.hashtagfeminism.com:80/top-feminist-hashtags-0f-2013-f/.

The socio-political and cultural context of 2013 is important to expand on here because it places feminist issues in the context of contemporary discussions and events happening at the time. Tensions among feminists were reaching a tipping point as Black women and other feminists of color continued to call out white feminists' erasure of their histories and online advocacy work (myself included, see Conley 2013f). Mikki Kendall (2013) details aspects of this tipping point in the *Guardian* explaining the origins of #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. Jessica Marie Johnson (2013) also presents a detailed cultural history of the #FemFuture report and convening in 2013, funded in part by Barnard College, Columbia University. These moments carried out across Twitter and other online platforms arguably characterize a reckoning for U.S. feminism in the early twenty-first century. Also at this

Figure 1.2. Beyoncé album cover. By Columbia Records, Public Domain.

time, President Barack Obama was entering his second term, and the political landscape in the U.S. remained divisive, especially online. Twitter also became a publicly traded company in 2013, impacting the platform's operations and capital growth, including the launch of Vine, a short-form video hosting service. The year ended with the surprise release of *Beyoncé*, a non-marketed digital album that generated historic buzz, including 1.2 million tweets in twelve hours on the day of its release. The cultural significance of Beyoncé's digital album coupled with intracommunity tensions, political climate, and the expansion of technology infrastructures shaped how feminist discourse and practices played out across online spaces. To be sure, 2013 was a year digital media landscapes changed and newer modes of sociality emerged with Black women and women of color shaping the frontier.

The year 2014 mirrored 2013 in the way users continued to employ a strategy of rapid diffusion of feminist and anti-racist discourse using hashtags (Conley 2014b). Hashtags like #YouOkSis, #YesAllWomen, #BringBackOurGirls represented transnational feminist discourse that re-centered women and girls, primarily Black women and girls in the face of misogyny and misogynoir (Bailey 2014; Bailey and Trudy 2018). Hashtags archived these moments in time, subsequently opening up an entire area of study that would be written about and researched for years to come.

Roughly 104 hashtags were indexed and 54 articles were published on Hashtag Feminism, which Kelly Ehrenreich and I co-edited from 2013–2015. These articles, some of which are detailed in table 1.1, represent the most visible discourse on Twitter that highlighted racialized gender violence and the failure of liberal white feminism. In explaining the social and political context of hashtag activism, Ehrenreich (2014) outlines four tenets of hashtag feminism to consider based on her analysis of the discourse captured on Hashtag Feminism between 2013 and 2015. She writes:

1. Tweeting about something does not necessarily bring about political change.
2. Hashtag feminism may preach to the choir, but we still have to take our choirs offline and out into the community.
3. Representation in the media is key and hashtags, in many ways, disrupt mainstream media narratives about marginalized communities and unjust legislation.
4. Online communication by way of hashtags can help birth a new generation of understanding, empathy, and acceptance.

The events surrounding Renisha McBride's untimely death marked an origin story of the platform, Hashtag Feminism. My blog post "#RenishaMcBride and online activism #femfuture #fem2 #Twitterfeminism #f" (Conley 2013b) was the second post to appear on Hashtag Feminism the day of its launch on December 20, 2013. This post, along with the online case study I published one month prior (2013a), informed the mission of Hashtag Feminism as an intersectional digital space that reproduced discourse about racialized misogyny and gender violence in the United States. The story of Renisha McBride is also one about how advocates and activists used Twitter and hashtags to organize local protests, push news outlets to cover her death, and pressure local officials to take legal action against her killer. In keeping with Ehrenreich's tenets from above, it was not enough for activists to use #RenishaMcBride and #RememberRenisha to bring about awareness, they also had to take their advocacy offline. They leveraged online communication technologies like hashtags, YouTube videos, and digital news stories to cement Renisha McBride's legacy in our collective memory. What was once an under-

Table 1.1.

Hashtag	*Year*	*Description*
#RenishaMcBride	2013	Locates the story about Renisha McBride, who was shot and killed in Dearborn Michigan on November 2, 2013. The hashtag and its adjacent hashtag #RememberRenisha points to grassroots organizing led by activists and mediamakers in protest of her death.
#NotYourAsianSidekick	2013	Created by Suey Park on December 14, 2013 to "engage a critical conversation about Asian American feminism" (Conley 2013e). Park later faced public backlash that scholar Yasmin Nair (2016) documents and critically analyzes.
#TwitterFeminism	2013	Locates contentious debates among online feminist communities about the utility of Twitter and its users to engage in feminist causes.
#MarissaAlexander	2013	Locates the story about Marissa Alexander, a domestic abuse survivor who faced sixty years in prison for defending herself against her husband. The adjacent hashtag #FreeMarissa points to grassroots organizing led by activists and mediamakers in protest of her incarceration and domestic violence laws.
#BlackFemMusic	2013	Created by the PBS program *News and Then* as part of a Twitter chat and inspired by Beyoncé Knowles' album release. The discussion covered issues relating to Black women in music and the role of Black feminism in popular music.
#PGPDVice	2014	Locates public backlash to the Prince George's County Police Department in Maryland when announcing they would live-tweet a prostitution sting.
#YesAllWomen	2014	Created on May 24, 2014 by a user who wished to remain anonymous in response to the Isla Vista killings and in response to the hashtag #NotAllMen. The hashtag locates stories about violence against women, noting the relationship between misogyny and gun violence in the United States. #AllMenCan became an adjacent hashtag deriving from #YesAllWomen.
#HobbyLobby	2014	Locates public backlash to the Supreme Court's decision in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* that would allow companies to withhold contraception coverage from their employees on the grounds of religious belief. Adjacent hashtags include: #DrHobbyLobby and #NotyMyBossBusiness.

Hashtag	*Year*	*Description*
#YouOkSis	2014	Locates Black women and women of color's stories about experiencing street harassment and bystander intervention, as well as conversations in response to #ThatsWhatHeSaid and #StopStreetHarassment. Feminista Jones started the conversation on Twitter about Black women's encounters of street harassment, in particular, asking "You Ok, sis?" after which Black Girl Danger turned Jones' question into a hashtag (Conley 2017).
#WhyIStayed	2014	Created by Beverly Gooden on September 8, 2014 who started a conversation by posting a series of tweets about domestic abuse after video footage was released online showing NFL Player Ray Rice assaulting his fiancée Janay Palter in an elevator.
#BlackGirlsMatter	2015	Created in response to a report published by Kimberlé Crenshaw and the African American Policy Forum about Black girls and the school-to-prison pipeline. Adjacent hashtags include #WhyWeCantWait, and later #SayHerName.
#BaltimoreUprising	2015	Locates protest stories following Freddy Gray's death in Baltimore, Maryland. Social media users made #BaltimoreUprising to counter the narrative about community protests characterized in #BaltimoreRiots. Adjacent hashtags include: #FreddyGrey, #BreakTheCurfew, #BaltimoreLunch, #BaltimoreCurfew #JusiceforFreddieGray, and #Baltimore.

reported story about a young Black woman who was killed in Dearborn, Michigan became an early marker in hashtag feminism history made possible by Black women's organizing online and offline. Hashtag Feminism also celebrated the organizing work and storytelling surrounding anti-racist issues. #BaltimoreUprising (Springer 2015), for example, was the final hashtag analyzed on Hashtag Feminism. This hashtag locates Ferguson-era racial politics led by young Black activists who were using hashtags as a counter narrative strategy for protesting police violence against Black Americans.

In 2016, Hashtag Feminism was hacked by unknown sources and could not be accessed (Conley 2016). I was able to restore most of the content through a variety of methods, including using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine and parsing through old emails, Google Documents, and other saved documents that stored older drafts of essays written by former contributors. By 2018, I relaunched Hashtag Feminism primarily as an archive of restored content. The threat of losing discursive content on the web should be an important consideration for anyone documenting and archiving digital

cultures. So while I consider Hashtag Feminism a platform "born out of love for Internet culture and passion for social justice" (Conley 2019), I recognize too that preserving feminist discourse on the web is laborious and platforms are vulnerable because technologies remain unstable.

Feminist Digital Media Scholarship

A review of key terms and titles across digital feminist scholarship reveals that the term *hashtag feminism* has been used less often since 2013 than the term *digital feminism* (see table 1.2).[2] Though this review does not encapsulate all research published on feminist hashtags (for instance, there are articles written that cite feminist hashtags without terms being used as keywords or in the title), it does suggest that as far discourse goes, *digital feminist* and a close variation of the term have been the preferred scholarly descriptors. I believe one reason for this is because the term *hashtag feminism*, like *hashtag activism*, has been analyzed in mainstream press according to toxic online discourse and based on a false dichotomy of "real activism versus slacktivism" (Risam 2015; Casey 2016). That said, however, feminist bloggers were among the earliest critics to debunk this false equivalence (Bailey and Gumbs 2010; Conley 2012a; Conley 2012b).

That said, as it relates to digital feminist scholarship, it appears *hashtag feminism* is not considered an all-encompassing term whereas *digital feminism* seems broad enough to encapsulate a study of feminist practices online. While the terms *digital feminist* and *digital feminism* reign supreme in areas of critical studies, the term *hashtag feminism* may have lost discursive relevance as scholars continue to formulate new understandings about feminist digital cultures. A long-term consequence of moving away from "hashtag feminism" as a key term in research could perhaps result in discursive delegitimization across critical studies research—again, as noted by Wynter's words at the beginning of this section (1992), "to be effective, systems of power must be discursively legitimated" (65). Though Wynter was speaking in the context of the European bourgeoisie, her insight can also be applied to how knowledge get constructed and valorized across critical studies scholarship. As both a technical and cultural artifact, the hashtag is a unique indicator for documenting and recording histories of social movements and counternarratives. It also seems necessary to recognize not only the hashtag's discursive and technical function in feminist research, but also its historical context as a culture defining communication technology. As such, I believe hashtag feminism, as an area of inquiry and key term, should continue to be scrutinized and indexed across academic research.

A review of the Hashtag Feminism website and feminist digital media studies database suggests that HFAD characterizes a discursive strategy for 1) locating shared feminist referents across transnational contexts and 2)

Table 1.2.

Terms	*Instances of Terms as Keyword*	*Instances of Terms in Title*
Digital feminist; or digital and feminist	5,244	11
Digital feminism; or digital and feminism	2,930	7
Feminist hashtags; or feminist and hashtags	272	5
Hashtag feminism; or hashtag and feminism	176	2

archiving digital feminist cultures. Though hashtag feminism is arguably considered a waning descriptor to examine feminist practices online, as evident in the hashtags analyzed on Hashtag Feminism starting in 2013, hashtag feminism has done well to call attention to worldwide feminist issues and stories, and the social contexts and histories surrounding them. In the case of #RenishaMcBride, for example, Black women and women of color leveraged the hashtag as an indexing process to shape public discourse while calling attention to racialized gender violence. In the case of #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, among other similar hashtags for example, the hashtag also locates righteous anger about the erasure of Black women and women of color across movements for gender justice.

HASHTAG FEMINISM-AS-EMBODIED-PRACTICE (HFAEP)

By now, the reader might have gathered that I am preoccupied with origin stories. My proclivity to the study of hashtags is likely a result of this preoccupation and why I often recite in my scholarship that hashtags locate stories. In the case of hashtag feminism, I consider origin stories events to critically examine digital cultures that also preserve stories from Black and non-white queer women, femme, and trans people online (Conley 2020). My view of origin stories across digital culture is influenced by Sylvia Wynter's notion that stories reflect human scripts, ones that tell us how we are and what we are across "shared virtual worlds" (Ambroise 2018, 848). Wynter's writes, "[o]ur 'stories' are as much a part of what makes us human . . . as are our bipedalism and the use of our hands" (Wynter, 2015, 217). Stories help organize people lives by narrating what *being* human means. To further elaborate on Wynter's view of the storytelling human, Ambroise writes:

> Wynter proposes that we humans know, feel, and experience ourselves not solely in biocentric terms as a purely biological being but also in pseudospeciating terms as a specific "type," "kind," or "sort" of being human—what she terms a "genre of being hybridly human"—that is derived from each origin

> story's/myth's answer to the questions "what is humankind?," "who am I?," "what am I?" (850)

In other words, and this is where it gets murky, the stories we tell ourselves reflect the genre-specific modalities (e.g., race and gender) around which we organize ourselves—and sometimes the stories we tell ourselves can betray us.

Origin stories in the eurocentric context, for example, separate humanity on the basis of genre-specific modalities and through a biocentric knowledge system informed by Darwinian thought. Wynter's vision gives humanness a future beyond biocentric modes of being.[3] Such a vision requires relational and interdisciplinary thinking to understanding "the rhythmic interplay between nature and narrative (McKittrick, O'Shaughnessy, and Witaszek 2018, 867). Given that the eurocentric script of humanness has overwhelmingly privileged the hegemonic man (or normalized genre of the human), I have in my research sought to re-center the humanness of the non-hegemonic man.

Wynter introduces the term *homo narrans* to describe the hybridity of the human as both bios and myths—as a "storytelling species" (McKittrick 2018, 25). Wynter's "anti-colonial project" (Trimble 2017, 277) not only challenges purely biocentric views of humanness, but it also calls into question a reliance on origin stories as events to narrate what it means to be human. For this reason, I often revisit my own conceptualization of origin story to think beyond linearity and hierarchy while maintaining an advocacy for authorial attribution as it concerns the work of Black women and women of color online (Conley 2020). I also consider how multiple origin stories can emerge across time and space, and the implications therein for documenting digital culture, namely feminist storytelling and organizing practices.

Informed by Wynter's concept of *homo narrans*, hashtag feminism-as-embodied-practice (HFAEP) describes a relationship between ontology and technology, between being and technical processes reflected in stories of lived experiences. Rentschler and Thrift consider this relationship through the idea of techne, or "ways of doing" feminism (2015, 242):

> What people actually do emerges from their embodied, situated and practical knowledge, their "ways of doing things" according to anthropological definitions of culture. Techne is an embodied relationship to technology, a learned and socially habituated way of doing things with machines, tools, interfaces, instruments and media. Techne signals more than technical skill; it constitutes embodied habits for acting and doing.

HFAEP suggests that feminist praxis cannot be separated from such things as, for example, memory, corporeal movement, socialization, diaspora, nature, and affective experiences. It also suggests feminist storytelling and organizing that confront sexism, gender violence, and racism, for example,

are inextricably tied to ways of knowing, feeling, and being. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa call this ontological entanglement *theory of the flesh* (2002, 21). Patricia Hill-Collins describes it through standpoint theory in Black feminist thought (2000, 270). Wynter's storytelling species questions what it means to *be* among systems of oppression, turning the concept of ontology on its head. Stories, then, "become" encoded modes of ourselves as living beings constantly struggling to disentangle from contained human scripts (Conley 2017). Hashtags, as technical processes, locate this entanglement, providing temporal and spatial ways of seeing the "*symbolic species* that we are" (Ambroise 2018, 848).

#MeToo

In 2017, roughly one month after #MeToo went viral on Twitter, Tarana Burke wrote an op-ed for *The Washington Post* pithily entitled "#MeToo Was Started for Black and Brown Women and Girls. They're Still Being Ignored." The article was written in response to mainstream attention directed towards elite white women after journalist Ronan Farrow broke the story for *The New Yorker* one month prior about Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual misconduct. Most interestingly, Burke, who founded the Me Too movement in 2006, begins the article with a story about witnessing a Black waitress sexually harassed by the main cook at a local diner in Montgomery, Alabama. As has always been the case with Burke's advocacy across media, she leveraged her access to mainstream press in efforts to recenter Black women in the movement to fight against sexual assault and harassment. Burke writes:

> From the start of #MeToo going viral and the recognition of my years of work preceding it, I have been happily allowing this wave of attention to shine a much-needed light on the fight to end gender-based violence. I founded the "me too" movement in 2006 because I wanted to find a way to connect with the black and brown girls in the program I ran. But if I am being honest with myself, and you, I often wonder if that sister in the diner has even heard of #MeToo, and if she has, does she know it's for #UsToo?

It is no secret that Black women and girls in the era of Me Too have overwhelmingly been ignored by mainstream press. When Black women and girls are being written about it is usually because other Black women, like Burke are writing about these cases (see also *Rejoinder*'s 2019 special issue). Black women and girls are not the only ones largely excluded; other communities include sex workers (Cooney 2018) and trans people (Talusan 2018), and oftentimes these communities overlap. That said, relative to the entire body of scholarly research on the Me Too movement, examining the lived

experiences of Black women and girls continues to be an under researched area, which appears to mirror public discourse.

Burke's framing of #MeToo through a story about witnessing the sexual harassment of Black waitresses in Alabama is as much a mobilizing strategy as it is a discursive one. Oftentimes, when Black women advocates, scholars, and public figures write about, discuss, and analyze #MeToo, we are intent on re-centering Black women and girls in the movement. Doing so creates a narrative strategy that simultaneously disrupts normative discourse surrounding gender-based violence and informs the public, including the academy, about gender-based violence unique to Black women and girls. As an embodied practice, advocates, scholars, and public figures enact Ehrenreich's (2014) third tenet of hashtag feminism, namely to "disrupt mainstream media narratives about marginalized communities and unjust legislation."

Analyzing #MeToo through the construct of HFAEP demonstrates how Black women have organized across online spaces based on shared lived experiences and "*shared resistance*" to erasure in the movement (Sharma 2018, 179). Much like other hashtags that point to Black women and girls' stories of gender-based violence like #WhyIStayed and #YouOkSis, #MeToo locates Wynter's *homo narrans* as well as the mobilizing work involved in re-centering the humanness of Black women and girls. At the same time, #MeToo also locates an origin story across mainstream media, which upholds the idea that sexual harassment and assault are the burden of white upper-class cis women. Further, stories of Me Too and the hashtag that locates them capture a longstanding history of competing solidarities in the fight for gender and racial justice.

HASHTAG FEMINISM-AS-IDEOLOGY (HFAI)

Wynter's once said in an interview, "[g]ood heavens, just as we had to fight Marxism, we're going to have to fight feminism" (Thomas, 2006). In the spirit of Wynter's candid discontentment with ideological markings of feminism, I begin this section citing examples of conflict and confrontation across time and space to illustrate moments when feminist ideologies emerge and collide. In 2013, I wrote an open letter to feminist writer Amanda Marcotte that, in part, asked: "Amanda, I wonder: What is your understanding of online feminism?" (Conley 2013f). The letter was published online for *The Feminist Wire* in the spirit of Audre Lorde's letter to Mary Daly, who in 1979 took Daly to task for her erasure of Black women's experiences and ideas in the book *Gyn/Ecology*. Lorde acknowledged Daly's work for its generative and provocative insights on "the true nature of old female power" (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002, 101). At the same time, however, Lorde invited Daly to consider how her work promoted an ahistorical view on the ecology of wom-

en, which espoused a belief that all women suffer the same oppressions. Lorde called on Daly to explain her misuse of Black women's words to support claims in the book. Lorde writes:

> Mary, do you ever really read the work of black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already-conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? This is not a rhetorical question. To me this feels like another instance of the knowledge, crone-logy and work of women of color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western-european frame of reference. (103)

Lorde's letter came during a moment in feminist history when feminists of color were openly challenging second wave feminism in print, on television and radio, in academia, and in the streets. This largely white middle class women's movement did little to speak the issues of working class Black women, Indigenous women, and other women of color.

At the time I published the open letter to Marcotte, I was also referring to white feminists' erasure of Black and Brown women's ideas and grassroots work documented online, namely Marcotte's re-appropriation of feminist blogger Brownfemipower's work on gender-based violence in immigrant communities. A few months later, Mikki Kendall created the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen in response to white feminists' dismissal of women of color who at the time were critical of Hugo Schwyzer, a self-identified feminist who engaged in sexual misconduct with female students and abusive behaviors towards women of color online. Kendall (2013) writes: "Digital feminists" like Jill Filipovic (also a *Guardian* columnist), Jessica Coen, Jessica Valenti and Amanda Marcotte were, in our view, complicit in allowing Hugo Schwyzer to build a platform—which, as he has now confessed, was based partly on putting down women of color and defending white feminism." Kendall argued that white feminists' "brand of solidarity centers on the safety and comfort of white women" (Kendall 2013). This message resonated as #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen immediately went viral. Kendall's hashtag located contested solidarities in feminism, both generational and ideological across time. Black women's fight for representation and acknowledgment in social movements, in theory, in the home, and in our communities is nothing new. What Kendall and I identified in 2013 was something for which Lorde and Wynter had already been advocating; that is, for white feminists to come to terms with generations of betrayal of Black and Brown women in public and in private spaces.

Implicit in calling attention to the waywardness of white feminism is the struggle to undo scripts of humanness that uphold colonialism, capitalism, and whiteness as ideology. Black feminists have a long tradition of rejecting white feminism as a liberatory strategy for a select few and for its one-size-

fits-all vision for the colonized subject. Black feminists continue this tradition across digital spaces to bring attention to white feminism's ineffectiveness as an organizing strategy and as an ethos. Similar to how social media platforms like Twitter and code like U+0022 represent a logic of standardization (Conley 2017), white feminism too is an ideology of standardization. It represents a faction of feminism at odds with a Black feminist ethos for justice and liberation, which seeks to undo the mess colonialism made.

Factions in feminism are perhaps most apparent in the constant struggle for Black and Indigenous women (cis, trans, and queer) to escape otherness in theory and across social movements where race and nativeness have been relegated to footnotes and otherwise ignored. But representation is not enough. A Wynterian view understands representation as "the central mechanism at work" in the process of colonization (Sharma 2015, 169). Black and Indigenous women are trapped within the contours of symbolic representation that have been "designed to institutionalize the new racist orders implemented by different colonial empires" (Sharma 174).

To articulate an escape of *being* colonized should, in part, be a central tenet to feminism, regardless of ideological underpinnings. This requires a reorientation to history and to language. The failure to acknowledge this tenet might also speak to where solidarities lie, whether in the realm of knowledge or practice, solidarities rest in the interpretation (hermeneutic) of what justice and liberation look like. Hashtags point to these interpretations and help us see factions at work. More importantly, however, hashtags locate thresholds where reorienting away from colonized scripts of humanness can take shape.

Hashtag Feminism-as-Ideology relies on technical artifacts and contemporary vernacular to articulate and interpret feminist thought and practice. It is a belief that technical processes reflect shared referents, human scripts, and virtual worlds, and as such, feminist solidarities and resistance must both be scrutinized. HFAI pushes feminist theory to account for documenting feminist ways of knowing, doing, and being online while historicizing the technical processes used to index thought and practice across time and space. HFAI espouses a belief that the practices of indexing and archiving digitally born content can and should respond to ideological standards of feminism that uphold colonialism, capitalism, and whiteness as tenets. As an ideological perspective of feminism at the intersection of technology and culture, hashtag feminism reimagines solidarity, and values the indexing process for locating sites of becoming across feminist ways of knowing, doing and making, and being.

LOCATING BECOMING ACROSS THE EPISTEME, TECHNE, AND ONTOLOGICAL: A VISION FOR FEMINISM

Hashtag feminism as a conceptual framework captures technical processes that locate discursive forms of feminism, feminist practices (like storytelling and organizing), and ideological underpinnings of feminism, as well as locates technical infrastructures that align or malign with a feminist ethos for justice and liberation. The constructs analyzed here manifest in various ways and are informed by ontological renderings of humanness. Hashtags locate these manifestations, namely the tension that exists across feminist ways of knowing (episteme), feminist doing and making (techne), and ways of being (ontological). These constructs, however, ought not be understood in isolation but rather considered for their mutually constitutive function for locating sites of becoming.

When I wrote "Decoding Black feminist hashtags as becoming" (2017), I was demonstrating decoding-as-stance as a critical method for mapping entanglement among feminist discourse, practice, and ideologies of technology. I was also offering this method as a vision for how hashtags locate where and how shared anger can contribute to renewed solidarities. Becoming is understood as a threshold of potentiality where freedom from forms of oppression can take shape. Expanding on that vision here, I consider that in order to locate sites of becoming across ways of knowing and ways of doing, we must reorient and respacialize ourselves to see where "ontological unity" can exist (Sharma 2015, 180). Technical process, while imperfect, can help reorient ourselves to feminist histories across time and space, namely when and where feminists got it right and when and where we got it wrong. For instance, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen points not only to the ongoing tensions associated with white feminism in the Twitter age but the hashtag also harkens back to past generations when Black feminists confronted white feminists for their shortsightedness in advocating for gender equality and representation. This hashtag and many others show how ideologies, informed by colonized ways of knowing, move. They also archive and track the ways feminist discourse, storytelling, and ideologies morph overtime.

If a vision of feminism is one of freedom from all forms of oppression, then it must also consider a future that does not rely solely on contained scripts of humanness for justice and liberation. It is not enough to advocate for representation, as evident in some of the hashtags outlined here like #MeToo. A feminist vision of freedom must also consider how ways of knowing and doing can upend systems of oppression that seek to contain and reorganize people as a result of colonization. Locating contested solidarities can be an entry point for transformation. For instance, #YouOkSis was a necessary response to #StopStreetHarassment as #SolidarityIsForWhite-Women was a necessary response to #FemFuture. These hashtags, among

others created by Black women, locate both righteous anger and love for communities. They find stories of shared resistance and solidarity. They also provide an opportunity to re-envision freedom as a shared sense of advocacy—one that, in practice, manifests as disrupting fixed systems of thought and process, and disrupting one-size-fits-all ways of *doing* feminism.

CONCLUSION

If it seems trite to theorize feminism on the basis of the hashtag symbol, consider other ways systems of thought have been conceptualized through cultural artifacts. For example, Ford Motor Company's assembly line signifies a structuralist way of thinking about mass production, otherwise understood as Fordism. Similarly, complex technical infrastructures like the Internet might signify a reductionist way of thinking about technologies as at once invisible and agentive, otherwise understood as techno-determinism. Wynter expands on the value of theorizing through cultural conceptions. Wynter (1992) writes:

> Cultural conceptions, encoded in language and other signifying systems, shape the development of political structures and are also shaped by them. The cultural aspects of power are as original as the structural aspects; each serves as a code for the other's development. It is from these elementary cultural conceptions that complex legitimating discourses are constructed. (65)

In other words, there is meaning in the artifacts of our daily lives, and from those artifacts (and what I have attempted to do here) we can produce knowledge and reshape theoretical discourse.

In offering this conceptualization of hashtag feminism, it is my hope that the reader gained a better understanding of hashtag feminism beyond simply a moniker of feminism in the digital age. As I have argued throughout, hashtag feminism is a conceptual framework to help explain the relationship between feminist praxis and the technical processes enacted for capturing feminist praxis. This way of framing feminism underscores the tension at work around locating thresholds where solidarities lie, are contested, and where they are transformed. Further, this framework provides an opportunity to expand theoretical conceptions of feminism that accounts for the role cultural artifacts, both technical and material, play in capturing discourse, practices, and ideologies of our time.

NOTES

1. API is an acronym for Application Programming Interface, which allows users to access, retrieve, and send Twitter data without opening the Twitter application.

2. From October 2019 to October 2020, I monitored a corpus of key terms and titles across digital feminist scholarship dating from 2013–2020 using Columbia University's online library database (CLIO). I excluded newspapers and included only scholarly publications from books, journal articles, book reviews, magazine articles, journals, books, and book chapters. Though this review is not exhaustive, it does provide insight into the shape of scholarly digital feminist discourse over a year's time.

3. I have merely scratched the surface of Wynter's theorizing in this chapter. For more on Wynter's conceptualization of homo narrans and what she calls the Third Event of humanness, see Katherine McKittrick's edited volume *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis* (2015).

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