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Toxic femininity 4.0
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Abstract

This paper examines constructions of toxic femininity within fourth-wave feminism. Taking hashtag feminism as its focus, this article contends that charges of toxicity lobbed online reproduce divisive dynamics that have shaped earlier trends within feminist movements in the United States. It further suggests that Twitter, as a platform, amplifies deep discomfort with theories of intersectional feminism while shaping how normative gender is reproduced online.

Contents

Introduction: Toxic culture

> "Don't you know that you're toxic?" — Britney Spears

We live in a world mired in toxic threats. Earthquakes beget tsunamis beget nuclear disasters. Pesticide plants launch lethal gas clouds into the air. Explosions on oil rigs flood oceans with petroleum. Ebola patients travel by air, like some unholy game of Pandemic. Beyond the physical environment, we worry about toxic foods; read a proliferation of self-help books to cope with toxic relationships, families, and workplaces; and watch as government bailouts save zombie banks from their toxic assets. We valorize the non-toxic: generous friends, natural cleaning products, DEET-free bug spray. Once the watchword of the environmentalist movement, "toxic" has become a cultural code word for the irritants and pollutants that disrupt our lived experience.

The Internet, too, is subject to invaders that reveal how online spaces are subject to the same fraught power dynamics and inequalities than off-line ones. Think-pieces abound, addressing why Internet communities are toxic. Scholarship on online disinhibition effects theorizes why people behave with reckless abandon on the Internet when they are perfectly capable of normative social behaviors off-line. Such behaviors are a factor of interactions mediated by digital platforms that provide anonymity, pseudonymity, asynchronicity, discursivity, escapism, and lack of consequences (Suler, 2004). Trolls, doxxers, and communities on Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan are known for their ability to sow discord across the Internet but through doxxing — sharing personal identification details publicly — and rape threats are spreading terror off-line.

In the past year, in the United States media, a newly envisioned threat has come to the fore: toxic Twitter femininity. The women labeled as "toxic" are ones who use Twitter for intersectional feminist praxis. Where did these so-called "toxic" women of color on Twitter come from? What are they doing wrong? And how are they toxic? The answers to these questions help us better understand the relationship between toxic discourse online and the material effects that constructions of femininity have on fourth-wave feminisms. Moreover, they shed light on the ways that Twitter is implicated in the troubling production of normative white women at the center of contemporary feminism.

This essay considers responses to hashtag feminism that appeared between January 2013 and February 2014 in response to the #FemFuture report on fourth-wave feminism and the proliferation of intersectional feminist hashtags that began appearing in late 2013. As the site where online feminist activism manifests is in cyberspace, the Internet itself is the public sphere in which the hashtags, responses to them, and responses to those responses proliferate. As a result, the sources engaged in this essay include online opinion pieces from sites like the *Nation, XOJane, The Hairpin*, and *Bitch Magazine*. In the broader ecology of feminism online, these sites are part of public feminist discourse. Taking into account the trajectory of fourth-wave feminism that has emerged online, this paper considers how discourses marked as "toxic" instantiate gendered and racial notions of online feminism. It further suggests that social media platforms like Twitter play a role in understanding racial and gendered discursive formations that persist within social movements.

Discussion: Toxicity on Twitter

With the rise of social media came a unique opportunity for those with access to the Internet: a medium of expression that offers avenues beyond the local — to global conversations and communities. Feminist activists, among others, have taken advantage of these developments to organize online, using digital spaces to engage social action both online and off-line (Valenti, 2014). As a result, scholars of feminist history have proposed that social media has enabled a fourth wave of feminism distinct from previous incarnations of feminist movements around the world (Castledine, 2011). As the dominant, though contested, narratives of feminist history go (Hewitt, 2010), feminism emerged in three waves comprising different epochs. First-wave feminists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, whose work focused heavily on suffrage, would be stunned at the ease of communication among feminists around the world enabled by digital media. Second-wave feminists of the mid-twentieth century would recognize their critiques of patriarchy in feminist discourse that circulates online. Third-wave feminists would identify with increasing multicultural and global representation within feminist movements and continued interest in micropolitics advanced among feminists on the Internet (Gillis, *et al.*, 2007; Baumgardner, 2011) [1].

Critics suggest that the mere combination of feminism and the Internet does not itself constitute a shift from third wave to fourth wave feminism (Bromley, 2012). However, the Internet has enabled a range of possibilities and spaces for online feminist praxis (Shade, 2002; McIntosh and Cuklanz, 2013). Blogs, online forums, and Twitter hashtags are a few sites where feminists across the world have connected to mobilize not only global and digital but also local and face-to-face networks. Additionally, social media has enabled feminists to participate in content creation and dissemination that operates outside of modes of knowledge production controlled by gatekeepers, such as traditional publishers.

The #FemFuture report (http://bcrw.barnard.edu/publications/femfuture-online-revolution/) is frequently cited as evidence of this new current in feminism. Authored by Vanessa Valenti, co-founder of the Feministing (http://feministing.com) blog, and Courtney Martin, a Feministing editor, the report originated in Martin and Valenti's difficulties developing a sustainable funding model for the site. The pair gathered a group of 21 feminists at Barnard College in New York to discuss the impact of feminist activism online on feminist movements writ large and the funding issues plaguing such ventures. The #FemFuture report delineates the expansion of young women's participation in social networks in not only the United States but also around the world, viewing this growth as a key component of global feminist activism (Martin and Valenti, 2013).

The #FemFuture report was published to mixed reviews. Jessica Luther, a freelance journalist and founder of Flyover Feminism (http://flyoverfeminism.com), lauded the report for recognizing online feminist labor but criticized Martin and Valenti for speaking primarily with activists in the northeastern United States (Luther in Mirk, 2013). Jessica M. Johnson, an assistant professor of history at Michigan State University, acknowledges her respect for many of the participants in #FemFuture but notes, "There is a dangerous ignorance in assuming #FemFuture is a first, a start, or new" (Johnson, 2013). She goes on to identify a wide range of radical women of color feminists who have been building online communities for years. Tweets on the #FemFuture hashtag (https://twitter.com/search?q=%23femfuture&src=typd) raised a broad range of issues, including the report's focus on young women, dissatisfaction with the term "online feminism," with its implied false binary between "online" and "off-line" forms of feminism, and criticism of unexamined privilege in the report.

Responses to the report demonstrate one of the striking features of online feminism: the culture of the "call out." Calling out is the act of naming and shaming patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, or other forms of oppression (*e.g.*, racism, cis-sexism [2], heterosexism) in online platforms. The act of identifying oppression is part of broader feminist principles, and social media has provided public space for the call out to be produced and disseminated. To be sure, Martin and Valenti were recipients of the "call out" for the perceived exclusions and biases of their report.

Online feminist call out culture has a lexicon of its own. It's not unusual to find online feminists identifying instances of "mansplaining," a portmanteau of "man" and "explain" that describes a man speaking condescendingly to a woman as though he knows more than she does on a given topic (Solnit, 2012). Mansplaining done by a white man to a woman of color is "whitemansplaining." Exhortations to "check your privilege," to examine the facets of one's identity that may influence perception of a situation, are common. Charges of "tone-policing" may be made against those who criticize the manner in which an idea is expressed, rather than the idea itself. While these terms are applicable to off-line feminist practices as well, they are integral to the vocabulary of feminist call out culture online, particularly on Twitter.

In her 29 January 2014 article, "Feminism's toxic Twitter wars" (http://www.thenation.com/article/178140/feminisms-toxic-twitter-wars) Michelle Goldberg set off a heated debate about the toxicity of online feminism. She points to backlash over #FemFuture as a kind of ur-moment for online feminist call out culture, noting the shock that Martin and Valenti felt at the vociferous critique the report generated (Goldberg, 2014). Martin admits to having difficulty processing the response because critique felt "personal," and Goldberg adds quotes from activists like Samhita Mukhopadhyay to support the idea that the backlash to the report undermined online feminism itself (Goldberg, 2014). She likens the act of calling out to what feminist scholar Jo Freeman identifies as "trashing": second-wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s tearing each other down by vilifying and ostracizing those who gained some measure of power within feminist movement (Freeman, 1976). Charges of "toxicity," it seems, are the new "trashing" for online feminism. Perhaps the most troubling facet of Goldberg's article, however, is that she holds women of color

largely to blame for the backlash against Martin and Valenti. In doing so, she instantiates a notion of toxic femininity, positioning women of color feminists as the disruptive bodies that transgress fictive, ideal feminist spaces on Twitter.

The gold standard for understanding toxicity is Lawrence Buell's work on the ways that toxicity functions discursively. The notion of toxicity that Goldberg and those who amplified and expanded on her argument employ is a discursive one. In Buell's account, toxic discourse became common argot through environmentalist movements during the latter half of the twentieth century. While Buell traces the motif of toxicity to nineteenth century American literature, notably the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, he identifies a characteristic rhetorical deployment of toxicity. Buell defines toxic discourse as "an interlocked set of topoi whose force derives partly from the anxieties of late industrial culture, partly from deeper-rooted habits of thought and expression" [3]. That is to say, "toxic" comes to represent a set of themes that express ambivalence about industrial development, with respect to its effects on modern life.

Those who have used the discourse of toxicity in the environmental movement — largely grassroots environmental activists whose leaders include women and minorities who have experienced toxic threats in their towns — position it as a challenge to environmentalists to "make concerns for human and social health more central and salient than it traditionally has if it is to thrive, perhaps even to survive" [4]. The toxic, therefore, is marshaled as the flip side of the healthy, the well. Buell suggests that toxicity in its discursive formations — the act of naming a toxic threat — has not been taken as seriously as material forms of toxicity (Buell 2001). After all, when health, land, or something else is threatened, discourse may seem low-stakes.

Yet, when toxic discourse appears online, it does so in a medium that is easy to mistake as disembodied, divorced from material conditions. Indeed, more utopian approaches to Internet scholarship theorize digital spaces as those where one travels unencumbered by the identity categories or power dynamics that shape life off-line (Benedikt, 1991; Biocca, 1992). As the familiar cartoon goes, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." However, profile photos or avatars remind us that users are, in fact, embodied, even if they may not be exactly who they say they are. Digital spaces may be falsely perceived as a refuge from the embodied experience of difference (Stone, 1995; Plant, 1996). The screen that mediates between user and virtual space may be viewed as a filter that divides the messiness of life off-line from an online version (Turkle, 1995). The gap between embodied experience off-line and the seemingly disembodied qualities of online engagement appears to offer a way of hacking one's identity or playing with signifiers of race or other forms of difference. However, scholarship on embodiment has suggested that off-line identities cannot be disavowed online (Nakamura, 2002; Daniels, 2013).

Digital spaces do not exist outside of the matrices of identity that shape lived experience. Yet, digital realms are not simply extensions of off-line ones where power dynamics are rehearsed. Rather, they produce inequalities in their own ways by virtue of their material existence. As Anna Foka and Viktor Arvidsson note in "Digital gender: A manifesto," greater attention is needed to the ways that digital technologies alter social fabric beyond a real/virtual binary, while attending to how the Internet both challenges and maintains normative ideas of gender (Foka and Arvidsson, 2014). The threat of toxic discourse — along with charges of toxicity themselves — become totalizing online, amplified by platform. There, the stakes of toxic discourse are, indeed, high. Toxic discourse does not exist independent of material circumstances of feminism, nor is fourth-wave feminism a purely online phenomenon. Instead, it manifests in action, its material implications producing internal tension and divisiveness within feminist movements and reifying white women as the subject of feminist discourse, to the exclusion of male or women of color feminists.

These stakes are evident in the activity around Goldberg's pronouncements about toxic women of color feminists. Goldberg's initial article generated hundreds of responses, from United States mainstream media to scholars and activists reacting to her identification of toxic online femininity. This does not include the proliferation of tweets in response, many of which circulated links to responses while others amplified Goldberg's construction of toxicity, in agreement and outrage. The discourse of toxicity spread virally, circulating rapidly online among feminist activists and their detractors. The spread of the concept of toxicity itself provides a study of the role of Twitter in producing normative definitions of gender and, indeed, of feminism.

Nowhere has the scope of contemporary feminisms online been so visible as on Twitter. To put the sheer prevalence of Twitter as a global platform into perspective, as of August 2014, Twitter has an average of 271 million monthly active users with 500 million tweets appearing each day. Of Twitter's monthly active users, 77 percent are outside the United States (Twitter, 2014). Of total monthly active users, 50 percent come from the United States, Japan, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and Spain. The top 75 percent is rounded out with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Mexico, Russia, Argentina, France, and Colombia (Richter, 2014). With analytics Web site Alexa ranking Twitter the seventh most visited website in the world, the implications for connectivity are staggering (Alexa, 2014). Users whose tweets converge on a single topic often congregate around hashtags, the #-plus-word combinations that link messages to each other and enable searches on a common topic within the Twitter platform. While Instagram and Facebook hashtags have followed suit from Twitter's use of the hashtag, the economy of the hashtag operates differently on Twitter than on other platforms. Hashtags on Facebook and Instagram are primarily used for tagging and searching posts on a particular theme or subject. While tagging and searching are key elements of Twitter hashtags as well, communities have formed around trending hashtags during the last few years — some ephemeral and others enduring. The reasons for these differences are attributable to Twitter's unique characteristics: security options are simply fully open or entirely private; asymmetrical following is enabled, allowing users to follow others who do not follow them; and interacting with other users does not require any formal linking of accounts.

As an online platform, Twitter falls prey to the presumptions of difference — gender, race, class, sexuality,

among others — that have plagued the Internet since its emergence. Forms of difference, like gender or race, are perhaps best understood as social constructs. Their boundaries are delineated, produced, and maintained through practice and performances. Definitions of these categories are not fixed but flexible and highly relational. They comprise meanings that are situated in both space and time. The power to define these categories is a function of both dominant cultural authority and hegemony.

Twitter is implicated in the production of gender and other forms of difference. A range of scholarship has examined the possibilities of predicting demographic information from tweets through data mining, concluding that user gender can be classified based on tweets and profile metadata (Deitrick, *et al.*, 2012; Miller, *et al.*, 2012), even in multilingual datasets (Burger, *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, gender has been suggested to influence choice to engage with Twitter hashtags (Cunha, 2012) and to influence the content a user creates (Walton and Rice, 2013). Yet, this scholarship is implicated in the production of normative forms of gender by virtue of its reliance on binary gender and its presumption that gender classification can be reduced to "male" or "female."

The role of Twitter in producing particular kinds of identities speaks to the way the medium can at once create space for conversations but at the same time constrain them. For example, Twitter offers any user the opportunity to share information, thoughts, or tactics. The platform enables amplification of ideas through reply, retweet, and favorite options. Lists of Twitter trends draw attention to the hashtags gaining relative attention at any given moment in time, its algorithm calling more attention to popular trends. In spite of the avenues for user-created content, the usability of the platform is ultimately limited by the code making up the platform and the functionality granted to user by the platform's corporate architects. Curiously, users are not constrained by codes of behavior from the platform. As the recent GamerGate controversy showed, trolling, doxxing, and rape threats are common tactics directed at feminists on Twitter, while users have little recourse [5]. Though Twitter encourages users to report abuses they witness, whether against themselves or others, reporting users rarely yields results and blocking individual accounts is the only recourse. Twitter's user policies support the proliferation of forms of trolling because it allows anyone with an e-mail address to sign up for an anonymous account. Ironically, the affordances of Twitter that have enabled the platform to play a role in social movements like the 2011 Arab Spring — namely the anonymity that serves citizens of authoritarian regimes well — are the ones that also engender anti-feminism on Twitter.

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Toxic hashtags?

Hashtags are perhaps the best known manifestations of online feminism on Twitter and the cornerstone of Goldberg's case for toxic women of color online. The discourse of toxicity employed by Goldberg responds to the proliferation of intersectional feminist hashtags calling out the limitations of white feminism. By deploying the language of toxicity, however, Goldberg reified the position of white women at the center of fourth-wave feminism, effectively excluding women of color and men.

In general, hashtag feminism exists within the ecology of "hashtag activism," a term used in United States mainstream media to describe activism enacted or disseminated through social media platforms. Political writer Eric Augenbraun (2011) is credited as the originator of the term, referencing the #ows hashtag that mobilized thousands around the world through the Internet. The act of soliciting solidarity online through hashtags predates the Occupy Movement, however, as the Arab Spring movement is generally credited as the first large-scale social movement to use the hashtag as an organizing tactic. The utility of hashtags for activist purposes has been criticized by pundits and scholars who identify it in pejorative terms as a form of "slactivism" (Christensen, 2011). This combination of "slacker" and "activism" suggests the low-stakes act of clicking "like" or "retweet" or signing an online petition provides a sense of satisfaction for the "slactivist" who, in practical terms, has not contributed anything.

Like hashtag activism itself, hashtag feminism has garnered a range of responses, from the laudatory to the vitriolic. Tara L. Conley, a doctoral candidate at Columbia University, runs the site Hashtag Feminism (http://hashtagfeminism.com) with the goal of building a digital space to discuss and archive online feminism. She envisions the site as a "generative space of analysis, debate, and exploration" on the role of hashtags in feminist movements (Conley, 2013a). Conley has identified and analyzed the top feminist hashtags of 2013. She collected a 30-day sample set of tweets using Topsy and Keyhole [6] from 22 November 2013 to 22 December 2013. Conley determined the top hashtags based on archived tweets, reach, impressions, and viral metrics. #fem2, Conley contends, is the "longest running, widely used, and consistently referenced feminist hashtag" as of December 2013 (Conley, 2013b). Created by Twitter users @blogdiva (Liza Sabater) and @stoweboyd (Stowe Boyd), #fem2 remains an popular hashtag, with tweets in late August 2014 covering a range of feminist concerns, including gender wage gaps, historical anniversaries of women's rights milestones, and commentary on gender-based violence. Conley indicates that #femfuture, the hashtag linked to the #FemFuture report, lost traction by the end of 2013 but remained popular (Conley, 2013b). As of August 2014, #FemFuture continues to be used, less frequently than #fem2, with a large proportion of tweets self-referentially addressing the nature of hashtag feminism itself.

Two hashtags, however, have both garnered controversy and come to symbolize hashtag feminism in the public imagination: #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen (https://twitter.com/search?q=%23solidarityisforwhitewomen&src=typd) and #NotYourAsianSidekick (https://twitter.com/search?q=%23notyourasiansidekick&src=typd). Dubbed "weaponized hashtags" for their targeted political intent [7], these hashtags have become cultural touchstones for intersectional online feminism. Intersectionality is a theoretical concept articulated in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw. According to theories of intersectionality, axes

of oppression like race, gender, class, ability, or sexuality cannot be fully examined in isolation from each other (Crenshaw, 1991). Rather, multiple forms of oppression are intimately connected. Intersectionality within feminist movements has intervened in longstanding and ongoing tensions between women of color, who find that their concerns are unrepresented within "mainstream" (read: white) feminism. Feminist women of color, in particular, have embraced intersectional feminism, viewing it as a lens that represents the particularities of their experiences.

Mikki Kendall, founder of the intersectional feminist site Hood Feminism (http://hoodfeminism.com), began #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen to call out controversial male feminist Hugo Schwyzer. Kendall was angered by the way Schwyzer has bullied women of color activists online while maintaining disproportionate access to media outlets through which to disseminate his work (Tolentino, 2013). The hashtag, launched on 12 August 2013, trended worldwide and was used over 75,465 times between 12 August and 15 August 2013 (Topsy, 2014). #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen is generally considered the first of a trend of hashtags with a critical edge, taking on not only feminist concerns but also white supremacy outside and within the feminist movement. Participants called out not only Schwyzer but also white feminists who had provided him platforms, including Jessica Valenti of Feministing, Jill Filipovic of Feministe (http://feministe.us/blog/), and Amanda Marcotte of *Slate*.

In the wake of Kendall's success with #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, Suey Park, a writer and activist, launched the hashtag #NotYourAsianSidekick on 15 December 2013. Park's goal was to examine Asian American feminism, frustrated by the marginalization of Asian American women, particularly within Asian American and feminist spaces (Hirst, 2013). Conley's analysis shows that as of December 2013, #NotYourAsianSidekick was the fastest growing feminist hashtag (Conley, 2013a). The hashtag trended globally for over 24 hours, calling out issues as broad as patriarchy in Asian American cultures, white supremacy, stigma against mental illness in Asian immigrant cultures, the lack of representation of Asian Americans in media, and stereotypes. Tweets using the #NotYourAsianSidekick hashtag remain regular, bolstered by the occasional interjection by Park that elicit more tweeters (and Park's trolls).

The intersectional tags #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #NotYourAsianSidekick, though well received largely by women of color feminists, have been site of controversy. Around these hashtags has accrued a discourse of toxicity. What accounts for recourse to the language of "toxicity"? And what are the implications of this critical debate in feminist practice both online and off-line?

Because of Goldberg's article, toxic femininity itself has become a meme. As Richard Brodie has argued, after Richard Dawkins, a meme is "a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds" [8]. The catchphrase "toxic" has come to serve as shorthand for the tensions between mainstream feminists and feminist women of color online. The notion has been more prolific since the appearance of Goldberg's article than it was before it, so much so that Feminist Wire contributors Allie Jones and Arit John published "The incomplete guide to feminist infighting," a tongue-in-cheek titled but serious look at the major players in the emergence of toxic femininity. Dangerously, toxicity after Goldberg has emerged as a new part of the online feminist lexicon, particularly for tensions playing out along the axis of gender and race.

The persistence of the toxic women of color femininity meme relies on particular constructions of online feminist spaces as separate from off-line ones. This trope rehearses the utopian view of digital technologies producing liberatory opportunities and emancipatory spaces (Green and Adam, 2001; Earl and Kimport, 2011). To return to Buell, discourses of toxicity have emerged in academic conversations through the way cultural studies "tended to epiphenomenalize [the] physical environment by conceiving it as a production of geopolitics, capitalism, technology, or other human institution[s]" [9]. That is to say, the physical environment is often read as a site that is produced by the complex interplay of political and cultural power.

We are intimately familiar with the tensions between physical spaces and online ones. For example, we must consider the repercussions in "meatspace" for events that occur in "cyberspace." The construction "IRL" or "in real life" attempts to distinguish between what happens online and what happens in face-to-face engagement. Yet, online and off-line spaces are mutually constitutive, the boundary between them troubled. This is particularly true in the case of fourth-wave feminism, which may involve feminist engagement in digital spaces but is not exclusively an online phenomenon that exists in a segregated feminist sanctuary, immune from material reality (Camp, 1996).

Like a physical environment, the online environment is subject to pollution, to toxic threat. The rhetoric of toxic discourse depends on a narrative of an idyllic space that has turned into a lethal one. Buell cites Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* — a spring when no birds sang — and the site of the Love Canal — a canal filled with carcinogens over which a housing development was built — as examples of toxic discourse. The rhetoric of toxicity, he proposes, rests on a fantasy of "betrayed Edens ... a rude awakening from simple pastoral to complex" [10]. Birds once sang; now they don't. The picturesque middle-class neighborhood is slowly poisoning its residents. The existence of a "toxic" entity relies on an unadulterated pastoral ideal, what Buell calls "a nurturing space of clean air, clean water, and pleasant uncluttered surroundings that ought to be one's by right" [11].

At the heart of toxic discourse in online feminism is the construction of online space as an idyllic physical space under threat of toxic invasion. Like Buell's perception of environmentalist discourse, the online space is a pastoral space with all its attributes: serenity, charm, simplicity. For Goldberg and those who support her argument, the feminist space is intended to be a nurturing, welcoming space, constructed in opposition to the toxic threat from which it must be protected. With the arrival of toxic threat, that environment is violated. Such a depiction of online feminist sanctuary relies on a utopian vision of disembodiment on the Internet (Lavigne, 2013), one that ignores the realities of technological embodiment (Balsamo, 1995).

Activist and lawyer Andrea Smith speaks to this vision in her summary of arguments about toxic feminism:

> "Once upon a time, not long ago, there existed a place online where everything was civil and nice. In that place, people were able to engage in enlightened and evolved dialogue and they felt happy and safe. All of this changed when unruly and fearful invaders entered that place in significant numbers. The civil and nice space in Cyberland called 'Twitter' became mean and unproductive. Soon the 'pioneers' of Cyberland vociferously expressed their disapproval and most importantly their fear of the invaders. They used their loud speakers to broadcast their displeasure and to castigate the new arrivals for making Twitter toxic." (Kaba and Smith, 2014).

The idyllic vision of feminist safe space is prevalent among prominent white feminists. For example, Anna Holmes, founder of Jezebel (http://jezebel.com), states that online feminist space "feels like a much more insular, protective, brittle environment than it did before. It's really depressing" (Holmes in Goldberg, 2014). Filipovic weighed in on Twitter with her appreciation of Goldberg: "So glad @michelleinbklyn [Michelle Goldberg] wrote abt [sic] online feminist toxicity in @thenation. So many of us are scared to talk about it" (Filipovic, 2014). These responses privilege idealistic notions of niceness, civility and feminist solidarity. As such, being a (non-toxic) feminist relies on hewing to these values. This is not to suggest that civility is, in fact, a feminist ideal; rather Goldberg and supporters deploy a rhetoric of toxicity to police the boundaries of acceptable expressions of feminist praxis, to the exclusion of women of color.

This idyllic vision breeds a hegemonic version of online feminism that disavows divisiveness within online feminist movements, suggesting that the only appropriate exercise of feminist anger is that directed at sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny. For example, Goldberg suggests that the Women, Action & the Media (http://womenactionmedia.org) and the Everday Sexism Project's (http://everydaysexism.com) online campaign for a pro-rape content ban on Facebook is an acceptable expression of feminist dissent that is not toxic, that does not disrupt the pastoral ideal of online feminism. Meanwhile, the pushback against the #FemFuture report is an example of the toxicity that Goldberg emphasizes. Outward facing critiques are not toxic; in-house critiques of the feminism's allegedly safe spaces are toxic.

Yet, feminist women of color like Chandra Talpade Mohanty have questioned the exclusions of the "safe space" of feminism, which has parallels to the relationship between toxicity and risk. In contemporary risk society, a necessary condition for the proliferation of toxic discourse, everyday experience is perceived as potentially lethal (Beck, 1992). Mohanty highlights the way that safe spaces are predicated on omissions and violence against women of color (Mohanty, 2003). As such, the danger that feminist women of color risk online is amplified; the safe spaces of feminism do not seem to protect them. Online feminists embracing call out culture, like Kendall or Park, are asserting the dangers of the experiences of women of color and the relative privilege of white feminists online, privilege that is, indeed, magnified off-line. Yet, their willingness to name and shame racial privilege is positioned by Goldberg as the real toxic threat as she abrogates their right to speak to the risk of the disruptive bodies of women of color online.

Curiously, Goldberg acknowledges this fact, arguing that toxic feminism "pits middle-class white women against all the groups they oppress" (Goldberg, 2014). The dynamics she describes are simple: a contentious statement, particularly one involving a failure to check privilege or acknowledge intersectionality, leads to a call out on Twitter that proliferates through retweets and hashtags. Intention of the speaker is irrelevant and any attempt to explain oneself compounds the error. While Goldberg acknowledges that participants in call out culture come from many backgrounds, a significant portion of her essay focuses on the disruptions made by women of color in general and on Mikki Kendall and the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag in particular. For example, Goldberg writes, "Many consider her [Kendall] a bully, though few want to say so out loud" and calls Kendall "both famous and feared in Internet circles" (Goldberg, 2014).

Here, toxic discourse enacts a slippage. Goldberg represents Kendall and others as toxic threats, but the production of toxic discourse emerges from Goldberg herself. She further supports the ideal of a safe space under toxic threat by criticizing "the expectation that feminists should always be ready to berate themselves for even the most minor transgressions." She opposes this on the basis that it "creates an environment of perpetual psychodrama, particularly when coupled with the refusal to ever question the expression of an oppressed person's anger" (Goldberg, 2014). Presumably to circumvent criticisms of the racial biases expressed in these statements, Goldberg uses a quote from Brittney Cooper, Rutgers professor and co-founder of the Crunk Feminist Collective, to support her claims. She quotes Cooper saying, "I actually think there's a subset of black women who really do get off on white women being prostrate. It's about feeling disempowered and always feeling at the mercy of white authority, and wanting to feel like for once the things you're saying are being given credibility and authority. And to have white folks do that is powerful, particularly in a world where white women often deploy power against black women in ways that are really problematic" (Cooper in Goldberg, 2014). When criticized for her comment by other feminist women of color, Cooper suggested that her quotes were accurate though she had some disagreement with their framing (Cooper, 2014).

This perception of toxic response trades on yet another meme: the angry minority woman. The policing of affect through the emphasis on anger has been long used as a dissimulation tactic intended to discredit legitimate grievances from black men and women (Wallace, 1990; Tomlinson, 2010) though it happens to other minorities who vocally criticize white supremacy as well (Díaz and Jacobsen, 1991; Ramos-Zayas, 2012). This policing of affect is similar to "tone-policing" in online feminist lexicon. The implication, here, is that were an issue approached in a restrained way, the argument against injustice would be more convincing.

Indeed, Goldberg's article and the toxic discourse she originated accrues around hashtags like

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen or #NotYourAsianSidekick — ones that foreground intersectional analysis — and, yes, righteous anger. This anger unsettles the pastoral ideal and is, in retaliation, positioned as a toxic threat. Kendall herself has defended the role of anger in feminist activism saying, "I don't think that any women of color need to be respectable to be valuable" (Kendall, 2013); she rejects what's known as "respectability politics" — observing dominant white cultural norms and values in the pursuit of racial uplift. She goes on to criticize racial dynamics of the feminist movement when she writes, "I want feminism to be a movement that doesn't infantilize people who are already disenfranchised by assuming that the way people speak is an indication of the worth of what they're saying" (Kendall, 2013).

With toxic discourse linked strongly to feminist women of color and the affective elements of their critique, it seems the toxic specter online is intersectional feminism itself. Online feminists fearing toxicity are struggling with the argument that intersectional feminists have been making all along: there isn't a single, common cause within feminist movements. Indeed, the proliferation of intersectional feminist hashtags, demonstrates that online feminism is labyrinthine. By virtue of the Twitter platform, it manifests in decentralized networks of loose affiliations, from the fleeting to the longer-lasting, some of which may be competing. Kendall emphasizes this point writing, "We're all women, and if we're talking about being allies, that means working together for more than one set of causes" (Kendall, 2013). At the same time, the political weight of intersectionality is reduced to mere, toxic "infighting" (Goldberg, 2014). Indeed, the ability for Goldberg and others to frame intersectionality in this way derives from unexamined whiteness within feminist movements (Frankenberg, 1993; Carby, 1999). Not only do these patterns repeat within the boundaries of online feminism delineated by Goldberg and her supporters and structure online feminist spaces, they are the means by which Goldberg refutes the value of intersectional feminist engagement in favor of unity along gendered lines. The access afforded by Twitter for intersectionality is paradoxically circumscribed by the deployment of color-blind forms of feminism. What remains is a plurality of oppressions needing address among feminists, even more so since intersectional discourse is being positioned as toxic. Yes, it would seem, in the construction of toxic discourse, solidarity is for white women and for those willing to be Asian sidekicks.

Toxicity is being used by feminists online as a coercive force that rewards appropriate forms of (white) feminism and punishes (women of color) feminists online. Ironically, the perceptions of "toxicity" are by-products of the very privileges that online feminists are likely to call out. In this case, it's the privilege to ignore the importance of intersectional analysis to fully address oppressions. The debate that has emerged as the discourse of toxicity rehearses some of the issues that black feminists have raised about the relationship between feminist history and the activism of women of color. Despite the seemingly uncontroversial notion that a feminist movement should be inclusive — and compounded by the fact that women of color tend to experience greater ill effects of feminist issues — feminist history has at times elided the activism and contributions of women of color. Toxic discourse reifies this history, positioning women of color feminist activists as objects of toxic construction by white feminists and justifying their exclusion from the definition of a "real" feminist.

Conclusion: The cost of toxic discourse

Toxic discourse further begs the question of who has the right to online spaces uncluttered, free from pollution. The very "threat of infringement" that Buell identifies as fundamental to toxic discourse [12] plays out in online space. Perceived toxic threat itself plays a role in creating affinity groups who share the experience of having their "sense of place identification and social identity disrupted by toxic menace" [13]. Subtending these conversations is the unspoken tension with feminist movements, the real question of what role the disruptive discourse of intersectionality has in feminist analysis. The threat of intersectionality to hegemonic forms of feminism are consolidated in the figure of the toxic woman of color, shoring up the position of the good white feminist in opposition.

Similarly, the group of white feminists coalescing around Goldberg cling to the image of a safe, idyllic online space while their very identities as feminists are derived from positioning feminist women of color as disruptive toxic threats online. Indeed, it seems, arguments over the place of intersectionality within the feminist movement from the 1980s and 1990s persist in the policing of feminist women of color online and reveal the pernicious effects of unexamined whiteness among fourth-wave feminists.

As such, toxic discourse that springs up around feminists like Kendall or Park speaks to the persistence of racial utopia, verging on post-racialism, within white liberal feminism. In centering themselves as the "mainstream" of feminism, these white feminists rather conservatively rewrite intersectional critique into simply making trouble, while, comically, suggesting that people who foreground race in their analysis are the real racists. Just as hashtags like #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #NotYourAsianSidekick have a virality to them, an appeal that makes people inclined to trend the hashtags, so to do the toxicity discourses that have arisen around them. They propagate through social media in multiple forms; they participate in the public censure of women of color in the United States.

These toxic discourses, disseminated online, help replicate and amplify racialized and gendered differences that exist among progressive activists. In doing so, they position women of color as the repository of failure for online feminism, guilty of creating spaces in which white feminists claim a reluctance to speak, for fear of censure. As a result, engagement with intersectional, rather than single-issue, feminism is rendered a problem, a disruption, perhaps even a distraction from the putatively more productive work of an online feminism untroubled by "infighting" over racial dynamics. 🄵🄼

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Notes

1. Despite being the dominant method for describing the development of feminist movements, the "wave" narrative is a contested one. A major criticism is the United States-centrism and Euro-centrism of this history. For example, suffrage movements have taken place around the world at different times, but the "first wave" of feminism is pegged to women's voting rights activism in the United States, United Kingdom, and Western Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Further, the wave model relegates feminist activism by women of color to feminism's third wave — citing Third World feminists, like the contributors to the anthology *This bridge called my back* (edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa), in the early 1980s. Yet, scholars like Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Melissa Harris-Perry argue that black feminism, for example, has a much longer history. Norma Alarcón, Alma Garcia, Martha Cotera, and others have made a similar argument about Chicana feminism (or Xicanisma).

2. Cis-sexism is a form of transphobia that presumes that people who are trans* are inferior to those who are cis-gender (whose experience of gender aligns with the gender assigned at birth).

3. Buell, 2001, p. 30.

4. Buell, 1998, pp. 639–640.

5. The Gamergate controversy came to light in August 2014, when women in the game industry, including developers and cultural critics, began receiving misogynistic threats on the #gamergate hashtag. Gamergate reflects unease over questions of diversity within video games and resistance to feminist or social justice critiques of the industry. Targets of the #gamergate hashtag were subject to doxxing (their personal information shared publicly online), misogynistic trolling, and threats of rape.

6. Topsy (http://topsy.com) and Keyhole (http://keyhole.co) are useful Twitter research tools. On Topsy, searching by a keyword or hashtag yields detailed stats on the number of tweets per hour and on the last 30 days of activity. The results can be further refined by influencers, language, links, and images. Keyhole is a real-time tool for tracking hashtags. It identifies data from social networks and provides information on number of posts to a hashtag, users, breakdowns of original posts in comparison with retweets and replies, impressions, reach, influencers, and demographics. The site also provides location data for tweets that are geotagged. Keyhole also makes this information available for historical Twitter data, offering the possibility for examining an archive of tweets within a hashtag.

7. The term "weaponized hashtag" was popularized by Jeff Yang's *Wall Street Journal* commentary on the #CancelColbert hashtag ("Stephen Colbert, racism, and the weaponized hashtag," 29 March 2014) launched by Suey Park in response to a racist joke about Asian Americans that Stephen Colbert made on the *Colbert Report*. However, David Weigel of *Bloomberg Politics* used the phrase to describe #CancelColbert the day before in *Slate* ("Steven Colbert vs. the hashtag activists," 28 March 2014), and the earliest extant appearance of the term is a comical tweet from @a_antonellis stating, "tic tac toe is just a weaponized hashtag" (https://twitter.com/a_antonellis/status/413753762499420160, 19 December 2013).

8. Brodie, 2009, p. 11.

9. Buell, 2001, p. 31.

10. Buell, 2001, p. 37.

11. Buell, 2001, p. 38.

12. Buell, 1998, p. 652.

13. Buell, 2001, p. 43.

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