

THE HOPEFUL HASHTAG:
DIGITAL FEMINIST
PUBLICS IN THE TRUMP
ERA

JENNIFER HANSEN
St. Lawrence University



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Philosophy starts from some deep and wide way of responding to the difficulties life presents . . .

—John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*¹

Intolerance, abuse, calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as because of differences of race, color, wealth or degree of culture are treason to the democratic way of life.

—John Dewey, (LW 14, 227)

Keeping Faith with Deweyan Democracy

In his 1939 book, *Freedom and Culture*, John Dewey warns that the complex of customs—or the cultural conditions—shaping the institutions, habits, and practices of American democracy are not immune from the sweep of totalitarianism in Europe. In fact, in stark opposition to a chorus of “patriots” declaring that American-style democracy is the only antidote to nationalist trends and thereby must be protected from this external *enemy*, Dewey soberly observes: “[t]he serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign totalitarian states. It is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own institutions . . .” (LW 13, 98). In many of his writings from this time period, including “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” Dewey draws out the significance of the rise of totalitarianism on the Continent: namely, this current fact is both a caution as well as an invitation to remind ourselves that democracy is an enduring *personal* task (LW 14, 226). By a personal task, Dewey means that democracy lives not in our formal institutions and laws, but rather in the cultivation of individual habits—dispositions—that in turn animate collective actions toward bringing about a better future.²

¹ All citations of *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1967-1990), will be made in this essay as follows, references to *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW), and *The Latter Works* (LW) will be cited with reference to period, volume, and page number. The above epigram, for example, is MW 12, 110).

² See Richard J. Bernstein, “Creative Democracy—The Task Still Before Us,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (September 2000): 217.

Our American democracy is not something, nor will it ever be, that has been achieved and thereby stands as an everlasting bulwark against external or internal threats. Rather, only by continually directing our collective energies, intelligence, and creativity to studying the consequences of our current institutions, personal habits, and practices; by assessing how well our institutions, habits, and practices accord with the ideals of democracy; and, by experimenting with cultural conditions when we find they are not, can we guard against the evils of totalitarianism, fascism, or false populism from taking permanent residence.

In 2018, many would persuasively argue that the threat of nationalism is indeed *internal* in the Trump era; in fact, we likely will look back at this period in American history as a time when our habits, specifically and importantly our habits of communicating, were in desperate need of reconstruction. President Trump brazenly embraces an unreconstructed³ 'Nationalist' label to describe his policies and proclivities,⁴ so it goes without saying that his vicious rhetoric toward opposing viewpoints, e.g., the globalists,⁵ is infused with an absolutism that Vincent Colapietro⁶ compellingly points out will only result in violence.⁷ In his quest to snuff out dissent and

³ See John J. Stuhr, "Pragmatism About Nationalism," *Dewey Studies* 2, no. 3 in this volume for a sense of what a pragmatic, reconstructed view of nationalism might look like.

⁴ At a rally for Senator Ted Cruz, President Trump incredulously pronounced "Really, we're not supposed to use that word," he told supporters in a nod to the usual political sensibilities that he relishes disrupting. "You know what I am? I'm a nationalist, O.K.? I'm a nationalist. Nationalist! Use that word! Use that word!" See Peter Baker, "Use That Word!': Trump Embraces the 'Nationalist' Label," *New York Times*, October 23, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2SuufzJ>.

⁵ Todd Essig, "How Trump's Use of Nationalist and Anti-Globalist Speech Fueled the Pittsburg Massacre," *Forbes*, October 21, 2019, <http://bit.ly/2qlQbQB>.

⁶ See in this issue, Vincent Colapietro, "Visceral Politics and Heuristic Democracy," *Dewey Studies* 2, no. 3.

⁷ Within a week of each other, two events in late October 2019 demonstrate how nationalist, totalitarian propaganda incites violence. First, beginning October 22, 2019, Cesar Sayoc Jr. Democratic politicians and supporters started to receive pipe bombs in the mail from an ardent Trump supporter, Cesar Sayoc Jr. He sent 13 pipe bombs in total. All of his targets, including George Soros, Robert De Niro, Cory Booker, and Maxine Waters are regularly mocked and denigrated by President

debate, Trump, along with prominent Republican legislators, cynically characterize the press as “fake news” as well as disingenuously describe protestors exercising their freedom of association and free speech as “angry mobs” or “violent.”⁸ And while Russian agents interfering with the 2016 elections dramatically undermined public trust in voting—a fundamental means of expressing one’s voice in a democracy—new voter restriction laws deterring or burdening voters in states such as North Dakota; illegal purging⁹ of voter rolls in states such as Georgia;¹⁰ and continued partisan gerrymandering in states

Trump at his rallies. Then, October 27th, Robert Bowers gunned down 11 people attending Shabbat services at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Before he went on his shooting rampage, he left several anti-Semitic statements on social media, including his deep concern that “Jews were helping transport members of the migrant caravans,” which is one often cited to support President Trump’s newly ramped up anti-immigration rhetoric at rallies before the 2018 midterm election (see Dakin Andone, Jason Hanna, Joe Sterling and Paul P. Murphy, “Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting That Left 11 Dead,” *CNN*, October 29, 2018, <https://cnn.it/2QhstQV>). The “Tree of Life” shooting is now known to be the deadliest attack on Jews the United States.

⁸ Many protestors assembled in the Hart Building, the Capitol Building and the Mall, and other parts around the country during the second hearing for Brett Kavanaugh’s fitness for the Supreme Court of the United States. Some protestors confronted Republican senators directly, most famously two women—who stopped Republican Senator Jeff Flake, who was perceived to be a possible swing vote against Justice Kavanaugh. In the aftermath of these protests, many Republicans, including President Trump and Senator Grassley began a campaign of regularly branding these protestors as an angry mob or using mob rule tactics. See Matt Visser and Robert Costa, “An Angry Mob’: Republican Work to Recast Protests as Out-Of-Control Anarchy,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2018, <https://wapo.st/2Ddn6PZ>. Importantly, Dewey identifies the “desire for security” as a contributing factor to installing dictators to restore “law and order” (LW 13, 106).

⁹ See Jonathan Brater, Kevin Morris, Myrna Pérez, and Christopher Deluzio, “Purges: A Growing Threat to the Right to Vote,” *Brennan Center for Justice* (July 20, 2018): 1-34.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/purges-growing-threat-right-vote>

¹⁰ Brian Kemp, the Secretary of State of Georgia, who is currently running for Governor against former State House Minority Leader, and Voter Rights activist, Stacey Abrams, is currently facing a new lawsuit in a federal district court claiming he has unlawfully purged 53,000 Georgia voters, 70% of which are African American. This is not the first time Kemp has faced lawsuits for practices found illegal wherein he purged several hundreds of thousands of voters in Georgia since

such as North Carolina¹¹ more straightforwardly disenfranchise voters. In addition to attacks on the free press and the franchise, we are contending with an intensified partisan war on science, which deliberately focuses on discrediting democratic processes of inquiry, or what Dewey observes as useful about science as a practice conditioning the cultivation of other habits, namely, “a knowing that is self-corrective in operation; that learns from failures as from successes” (MW 12, 270). As such, in this era, many Americans are unabashedly believing “alternative facts”¹² or putting their faith in “junk science”¹³ that supports their preferred view, rather than adopting views that accord with actual conditions in our environment. Such intellectual laziness, social psychological studies reveal,¹⁴ is too often our default thinking unless we take seriously the need to create social conditions that support the cultivation of democratic habits.¹⁵

2012. See Meagan Flynn, “Georgia’s GOP Gubernatorial Candidate Brian Kemp is Sued Over Claims of Suppressing Thousands of Minority Voters,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2018, <https://wapo.st/2yAGlyT>.

¹¹ See Wendy R. Weiser and Max Feldman, “The State of Voting 2018,” *Brennan Center for Justice*, (June 5, 2018), <http://www.brennancenter.org/publication/state-voting-2018>.

¹² This phrase was infamously coined by President Trump’s senior advisor, Kellyanne Conway during an interview with *Meet the Press’s*, Chuck Todd. Todd was pushing Conway on the falseness of then Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s claims concerning the number of people in attendance at President Trump’s inauguration. Conway responded: “Don’t be so overly dramatic about it, Chuck. What—You’re saying it’s a falsehood. And they’re giving Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that.” For a full transcript, see Rebecca Sinderbrand, “How Kellyanne Conway Ushered in the Era of ‘Alternative Facts,’” *The Washington Post*, January 22, 2017, <https://wapo.st/2OYD1rA>.

¹³ Many Republican Senators (and one Democrat, Joe Manchin) preferred to appeal to a view that *any* gaps in Dr. Blasey Ford’s memory suggested that nothing she remembered could be credible. Journalist Avi Selk calls this view “junk science.” See Avi Selk, “The Junk Science Republicans Used to Undermine Ford and Help Save Kavanaugh,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2018, <https://wapo.st/2Q15w4h>.

¹⁴ Certainly, Dewey hoped that social science would begin to progress—become an experimental inquiry rather than a set of untestable metaphysical beliefs.

¹⁵ See, for example, Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2011). Kahneman characterizes thinking as composed of two systems—System 1 and System 2. The former tends to dominate and is automatic,

Dewey's abiding faith in democracy is an abiding faith in the powers of cooperative, intelligent inquiry to "[detect] ills that need remedy . . . and the formation of plans and methods for dealing with them . . ." (MW 12, 174). By cooperative, Dewey in no way means to suggest complete harmony or unity of purpose, rather he has in mind an association of persons with different talents, different contributions, different abilities, and even different ends who, by virtue of combining together, discover they are more efficacious in achieving their desired ends than singly (LW 2, 328-329). Cooperative, intelligent inquiry, should it be sustained, depends upon the cultivation of habits¹⁶ of communication—essentially human *interaction*—to successfully crowd out intellectual laziness¹⁷ (which is an ideal breeding ground for totalitarianism and fascism). Frankly, communication as a tool for identifying common purposes and organizing action to achieve such purposes would be wholly unnecessary should human organisms be so constituted to have a unity of purpose; it is because of the fact of our plural desires, needs, and temperaments that communication emerges as "the tool of tools (MW 1, 134)." Communication enables us to bridge our differences in order to identify a common goal; common goals are forged not found.

intuitive, quick, and prone to a variety of cognitive biases, while the latter is slower, deliberate, demands great attention and effort, and is thereby lazy. Hence, when we engage system 2 to check system 1 thinking, Kahneman explains that system 2 "is more of an apologist for the emotions of System 1 than a critic . . . and endorser rather than an enforcer" (103). Prior to scientific confirmation of our lazy cognitive machinery, Dewey himself observed that "[i]t is human nature to think along the easiest lines . . ." (LW 2, 284), and the evidence he provided for this observation relied on his theory of habit, drawn from William James' *Principles of Psychology*. Habits—what many social psychologists today call 'heuristics'—take a great deal less energy insofar as they automate regular tasks.

¹⁶ While I don't have space in this essay to this, it is essential to note that for Dewey the cultivation of democratic habits in individuals requires beneficial cultural conditions that support these habits in the form of customs and institutions. Primary among the beneficial social conditions that promote the cultivation of democratic habits is education, which was one of his life-long concerns.

¹⁷ See Scott Stroud, "The Challenge of Speaking with Others: A Pragmatist Account of Democratic Rhetoric," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2015): 95. Stroud provides an excellent account of how "partisan habits of discourse" work against democracy and in favor of totalitarianism.

Unlike democratic communication, Dewey notes in *Freedom and Culture* that one of the aims of a totalitarian regime is to “control the whole life of its subjects by its hold over feelings, desires, emotions, as well as opinions” (LW 13, 70). A totalitarian regime seeks total unity of sentiment to the degree that communication, and the inquiry and contestation required to carry it out, become enemies to state. A fascist regime appeals to ready-made non-empirical “theories” that, for example, scapegoat immigrants for low wages or threats to personal security. Such propaganda demands very little of the citizenry; it acts on their sensations rather than their intellectual judgment. Totalitarian habits of non-communication play to our default “. . . complacency in virtual enslavement, to sloppiness, superficiality and recourse to sensations as substitutes for ideas . . .” (LW 2 340). Democracy, on the other hand, comes to life, for Dewey, when it embraces the dispositions and practices of the scientific method: “freedom of inquiry, toleration of diverse views, freedom of communication, the distribution of what is found out to every individual . . .” (LW 13, 135). To weed out the totalitarian habits rooting in our current cultural conditions, we must, reconstruct our habits of communication in the new spaces they are taking place, namely, the sphere of social media.

In what follows, I will focus specifically on Twitter and the ‘hashtag’ (#) as a pervasive mode of communication in the Trump era that, despite Trump’s own practices, holds out promise for our democracy. Twitter is a unique social media platform insofar as it is a live, reverse chronological, unregulated stream of voices—or, at least not well regulated by mainstream media interests. Twitter does not organize information by algorithms that determine what should be read or paid attention to, nor does Twitter enable individuals to create what Dorothy Kim calls “specific digital neighborhood bubbles” in a way Facebook typically does (i.e., further reinforcing totalitarian habits of communication).¹⁸ Twitter is an unwieldy torrent of conversation to which anyone with access to the internet can join, i.e., no media affiliation, no celebrity platform, no institutional affiliation

¹⁸ Dorothy Kim et al., “Race, Gender, and the Technological Turn: A Roundtable on Digitizing Revolution,” *Frontiers* 39, no. 1 (2018): 151.

is required to participate. Twitter is, however, navigable by hashtags that enable one to focus conversations on specific ideas. Given that tweets are live streams—organized only by chronology rather than the putative social status of the individual or organization that tweets—this platform notably affords a space of deliberation, criticism, and participation of typically marginalized voices.¹⁹

To be clear, President Trump’s tweets are certainly not an example of healthy democratic communication insofar as he alternates between distracting individuals and the media from events unfolding on the ground that are likely to have deep, personal, adverse consequences for him and employing this megaphone to, as Dewey puts it, “[enlist] . . . the inertia, prejudices and emotional partisanship of the masses by use of a technique which impedes free inquiry and expression”²⁰ (LW 2, 341). However, the the #MeToo campaign is an

¹⁹ See Caitlin Gunn, “Hashtagging from the Margins: Women of Color Engaged in Feminist Consciousness-Raising on Twitter,” in *Women of Color and Social Media Multitasking: Blogs, Timelines, Feeds, and Community*, eds. Keisha Edwards Tassie and Sonja M Brown Given (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2015). For a discussion on why Twitter is an attractive forum for women of color to enter into public conversations concerning race and gender, see Rosemary Clark, “Hope in a Hashtag: The Discursive Activism of #WhyIStayed,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 5 (2016).

²⁰ To give just one example of the power of social media to distract, consider that during the Kavanaugh hearings, *The New York Times* published, on October 2, 2018, an in-depth, special investigation tracing the multiple tax schemes that President Trump, and his parents, used to cheat both New York and the Federal Government out of significant tax revenue. What *The New York Times* unearthed is yet another example of criminal behavior on the part of our President that could still be investigated and prosecuted. This reporting also gives detail evidence of President Trump’s fraudulent claims to be a self-made billionaire (a claim that was crucial to swaying many Trump supporters). Moreover, this systematic tax evasion meant that millions of dollars were effectively stolen from “the people.” See David Barstow, Susanne Craig, and Russ Buettner, “Trump Engaged in Suspect Tax Schemes as He Reaped Riches from His Father,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2qj6aiu>. On the very day that the *New York Times*’ story broke, President Trump clogged the social media and mainstream media airwaves by mocking Dr. Christine Blasey Ford at campaign rally in Mississippi. This callous and cruel act effectively buried the *Times* investigative reporting in the news cycle. See Josh Dawsey and Felicia Sonmez, “Trump Mocks Kavanaugh Accuser Christine Blasey Ford,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2018, <https://wapo.st/2EQ9rQj>.

instructive, promising, and hopeful counterweight to alt-right social media communication (as embodied by President Trump). I have selected this particular example of “hashtag activism”²¹ because thus far the #MeToo movement has been the most successful Twitter campaign targeting sexual violence²²—raising awareness of its ubiquity, breaking silences, and delivering significant accountability and reform to date.²³ The #MeToo movement illustrates in real-time, the Deweyan dynamics of democratic communication, including the importance of contestation among participants trying to forge solidarity—cooperative action—in order to oppose, modify, and problem solve the pernicious ills of sexual violence. By the ‘importance of contestation among participants,’ I mean that the #MeToo movement shines a spotlight on the corrosive effects of ignoring and erasing the experiences of women of color, indigenous women, poor women, disabled women, global south women, and trans women. Moreover, the open platform of Twitter not only more successfully shines a light on these oppressive practices, but it better enables productive criticism of ‘white feminism,’ thereby holding out the hope that traditionally marginalized voices will successfully disrupt customary habits of claiming that the highly visible, white, heterosexual women’s analyses, theories, experiences are *universal* experiences of gendered-based violence. The #MeToo movement, I assert, concretely illustrates Dewey’s hypothesis that optimal communication allows democratic publics to form and reform our environment.

²¹ See Guobin Yang, “Narrative Agency in Hashtag Activism: The Case of #BlackLivesMatter,” *Media and Communication* 4, No. 4 (2016) who is often credited with coining the phrase ‘hashtag activism.’

²² Alison Main, “The #MeToo Hashtag Was Used in an Enormous Number of Tweets,” *Mashable*, October 16, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2F6P7tY>.

²³ For the one-year anniversary of the start of the #MeToo movement, *The New York Times* provided an interactive graphic of 201 men who were fired from their jobs—in a variety of industries—on charges of sexual harassment or sexual misconduct, <https://nyti.ms/2JS2vBc>.

Language is a Commons

With all the damage that's being done to the social fabric, in matters ranging from race relations to income inequality, to name just two areas where the national leadership seems not only determined to make things worse but weirdly excited about it, fretting over the state of the language seems like an indulgence. . . [but] words are tools, and what matters is the job that they are being made to do. Still, language is a commons. It's a resource that we share, and the resource is impoverished when words are redefined, weaponized, or otherwise co-opted and bent out of shape.

—Louis Menand, *New Yorker*²⁴

*What history has shown us time and again is that if marginalized voices—those of people of color, queer people, disabled people, poor people—aren't centered in our movements then they tend to become no more than a footnote. I often say that sexual violence knows no race, class or gender, **but the response to it does.** 'Me too.' is a response to the spectrum of gender-based sexual violence that comes directly from survivors—all survivors. We can't afford a racialized, gendered or classist response. Ending sexual violence will require every voice from every corner of the world and it will require those whose voices are most often heard to find ways to amplify those voices that often go unheard.*

—Tarana Burke, *Washington Post* (my emphasis)²⁵

In the January 8, 2018 issue of *New Yorker*, Louis Menand, in unsurprisingly Deweyan fashion, suggests that “[a]rguably, the Word of the Year is not a word at all. It’s an alphanumeric character, #.”²⁶ Menand continues “[t]he president speaks in hashtag, but so do the President’s opponents, and so does, for example, the #MeToo

²⁴ Louis Menand, “Words of the Year: What Language Can Possibly Be Used to Capture The Upside World of 2017,” Comment, *New Yorker*, January 8, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Dc0W0j>.

²⁵ Tarana Burke, “#MeToo was Started for Black and Brown Women and Girls. They’re Still Being Ignored,” *Washington Post*, November 9, 2017, <https://wapo.st/2KpAz7H>.

²⁶ Menand, Comment, *New Yorker*, January 8, 2018.

movement . . . # democratizes”²⁷ To put this in Deweyan terms, the hashtag, as a mode of communication, has the potential to integrate a public, which emerges when loosely associated individuals—or individuals form a network out of cross-cutting associations—simultaneously recognize a serious problem, and then set out to debate and discuss its complexities and contours to begin problem-solving (LW 2, 314). There is no *one* public; there are many publics.²⁸ A public emerges, most typically, in moments of crisis²⁹ because such moments clarify concretely—thereby enabling articulation—the frustrated purposes, aims, and goals of many—or what Melvin Rogers poignantly describes as “a complex horizon of value and meaning that is now fractured”³⁰ When problems can be named—communicated—so that all affected by them recognize a shared interest, a public establishes a ‘common’; a public becomes a community (LW 2, 323-324). Erin Tarver in her analysis of the feminist blogosphere further elucidates that the formation of publics online promises to enrich our democracy by dislodging “entrenched patterns of oppression” because, as she rightly notes,

a community cannot and will not be truly democratic insofar as it remains a community in which some of its members are systematically disadvantaged and devalued, while others systematically benefit from their disadvantage and devaluation.³¹

²⁷ Menand, January 8, 2018.

²⁸ Eddie S. Glaude Jr. highlights that for Dewey publics—or what Glaude Jr. calls “emergent publics”—are historically contingent phenomena, they emerge in response to concrete political conditions and must be understood in those terms. See Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “The Problem of African American Public(s): Dewey and African American Politics in the 21st Century,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1, (June 2010): 26.

²⁹ Rosemary Clark, “Hope in a Hashtag,” 792.

³⁰ Melvin Rogers, “Dewey and His Vision of Democracy,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1 (June 2010): 81.

³¹ Erin Tarver, “On Cosmopolitan Publics and Online Communities,” in *Cosmopolitanism and Place*, eds. Jessica Wahman, José M. Medina, and John J. Stuhr (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017): 249-250.

What is important here, and why Twitter in particular should give us hope, is that improving the conditions for communication in service of problem-solving is more likely to enable us to alleviate problems—especially communication that can eliminate obstacles to democracy such as entrenched patterns of oppressing some citizens so as to directly enrich other citizens. When our habits of communication favor pluralism, rather than exclude and marginalize voices out of a desire for unity (totalitarianism), we unleash the full potential of democracy as intelligent inquiry. If Twitter undermines this lazy, sloppy, custom of establishing a dominant, univocal view of a given problem—especially the problem of gender-based violence—then it is precisely the kind of technology Dewey imagined could provide optimal conditions for problem-solving. Rogers explains that for Dewey the very concept of ‘the public’³² “denotes a space of pluralism . . . There is no privileged access to mutually recognized concerns or solutions—that is, they must be built up discursively—and so all members stand on equal footing.”³³ It is in this vein, that Dewey’s notion of the public and, as I am arguing here, its enactment on Twitter with #MeToo, may speak to Tarana Burke’s claim that “[e]nding sexual violence will require every voice from every corner of the world and it will require those whose voices are most often heard to find ways to amplify those voices that often go unheard.”³⁴

³² I do not have sufficient space to tackle a disagreement between Tarver and Rogers over how to understand Dewey’s invocation of ‘the public’ rather than simply speak of ‘publics’ in *The Public and Its Problems*. Briefly, Tarver criticizes Dewey for construing ‘the public’ as a homogeneous and unified public. Rogers provides a more nuanced reading of Dewey’s concept of ‘the public’ (emphasizing the passages where Dewey uses the definite article) and offers an interpretation quite at odds with Tarver’s. Both Tarver and Rogers, however, ultimately take up the importance of publics as optimal spaces of deliberation in service of problem-solving.

³³ Melvin Rogers, “Dewey and His Vision of Democracy,” 86.

³⁴ Tarana Burke, *Washington Post*, November 9, 2017.

Discursive Activism

Language is power. When you turn ‘torture’ into ‘enhanced interrogation,’ or murdered children into ‘collateral damage,’ you break the power of language to convey meaning, to make us see, feel, and care. But it works both ways. You can use the power of words to bury meaning or to excavate it. If you lack words for a phenomenon, an emotion, a situation, you can’t talk about it, which means that you can’t come together to address it, let alone change it. Vernacular phrases— ‘Catch-22,’ ‘monkeywrenching,’ ‘cyberbullying,’ ‘the 99 percent and the 1 percent’—have helped us to describe but also to reshape our world. This may be particularly true of feminism, a movement focused on giving voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless.

—Rebecca Solnit, “#Why #YesAllWomen Matters”³⁵

The recent resurgence of the #MeToo movement reflects the longstanding marginalization and exclusion that women of color experience within the larger feminist movement in U.S. society. This marginalization of women of color has occurred within the #MeToo movement despite the fact that a black woman, Mechelle Vinson, was the plaintiff in the very first Supreme Court case to recognize a cause of action under Title VII for a hostile work environment created by sexual harassment; despite the fact that #MeToo began with a woman of color; and despite the fact that women of color are more vulnerable to sexual harassment than white women and are less likely to be believed when they report harassment, assault, and rape.

—Angela Onwuachi-Willig, “What About #Us Too?”³⁶

³⁵ Rebecca Solnit, “Why #YesAllWomen Matters: Phrases Like Domestic Violence, Mansplaining, Rape Culture, and Sexual Entitlement Help Us Address Issues Honestly and Open the Way to Change.,” *Mother Jones*, June 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2zfxsKs>.

³⁶ Angela Onwuachi-Willig, “What About #UsToo?: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement,” *The Yale Law Journal Forum* 128, (2018): 107.

Avoidance of the conversation has shaped our culture; cultures are defined not only by the stories they tell, but also by the ones they don't. It's the negative space that gives definition to the pictures we have of how men and women ought to live together—and that picture, of course, is the world of a series of old masters.

—Laurie Penny, “The Unforgiving Minute”³⁷

Returning again for a moment to the habit of communication, Dewey considers it one of the most, if not the most, important democratic habits to be cultivated because it unleashes new powers over nature and the *second-natured* worlds of custom and tradition that, borrowing Dewey's hydraulic metaphors, channels our behavior into certain predictable currents of activity (what Dewey calls habits). Communication is like a trough that diverts part of an otherwise indiscriminate flow of events into a navigable stream in which one can sift out of discriminate objects that “are subject to reconsideration and revision” (LW 1, 132). Phenomena that might feel as ungovernable as erupting squalls, through the mediation of the tool of communication, transmute into an intriguing engineering problem awaiting human intelligence. Even patriarchal dominance maintained through violence—and the cunning, adaptable strategies it uses—is rendered into a specific problem capable of being subdued or overcome.

The #MeToo campaign, like several feminist campaigns against sexual violence before it, is primarily a space of debate and contestation over the multiple and complex meanings of patriarchal ideology in order to dislodge the harmful dominant explanations or justifications of sexual violence. All too often, the dominant meanings of sexual violence circulating, especially when a perpetrator's acts become public—i.e., the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey (2012), the elevator video tape of Ray Rice beating his fiancée (2014), the Isla Vista shooting (2014), Trump's Hollywood Access tape (2016), or Harvey Weinstein's long history of sexually harassing and assaulting actors (2017), typically perpetuate non-egalitarian, patriarchal, and racist hegemonic power relations. Specifically, the

³⁷ Laurie Penny, “The Unforgiving Minute,” *Longreads*, November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2Q0S6W4>

dominant interpretations—regularly circulating in the mainstream media—explain away or weaponize these public scandals for other self-serving ends, unless spaces for contesting and generating alternative meanings of these acts occur. Linda Martín Alcoff makes more concrete the sort of dominant meanings that circulate—and threaten to crowd out more useful ones—in the wake of media coverage of sexual violence, noting that:

[p]ublic outrage can be channeled toward critical and ungenerous judgments about the women who come forward, or toward the sexism of *other* cultures, or toward the actions and attitudes of a few individual perpetrators represented as pathological, or toward the ‘need’ to close borders and shut out asylum seekers³⁸

And yet for Dewey, communication is the interactive, iterative social process of discerning vital, important, and missing elements from a provisional definition so that newer versions will be better equipped to do the work desired of it—if our concepts or definitions fail to adequately grasp the nuances of any given problem, then they will not be useful. In fact, the more sophisticated we become as communicators, the better we will become at detecting the work of domination as constitutive exclusions of relevant, vital information in our concepts that thereby weaken their problem-solving capacity. As I have claimed above, I am arguing here that the #MeToo movement—and many other hashtag feminist³⁹ movements related to sexual violence that precede it—use Twitter for the discursive task of delimiting the complexity of the problem as it concretely affects individuals, especially as they find themselves situated differently—and more vulnerably—by class, race, sexuality, and ability, in addition to gender. While the #MeToo movement has by no means escaped

³⁸ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018): 23.

³⁹ ‘Hashtag Feminism,’ is a term that has become prominent in the study of feminist uses of Twitter. For example, see Shenila Khoja-Moolji, “Becoming an ‘Intimate Publics,’ Exploring the Affective Intensities of Hashtag Feminism,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015): 347-350.

criticisms of falling into predictable patterns of excluding marginalized voices, I will argue those penetrating criticisms generate further contestation over the meaning of patriarchal ideology, promising, at least at the time of this writing, corrections, change of course, and thereby forays into restoring what Burke above describes as the footnoting of marginalized voices into the center, into the main text.

Many histories of second-wave feminism note that effective contestation of patriarchal domination was difficult until the problem could be sufficiently conceptualized. And, in a Deweyan vein, conceptualization of a social ill cannot afford sloppy thinking; it requires creating optimal conditions that thereby enable the participation of multiple points of view and individual experiences of any given phenomena because, as Rogers notes above there is, “no privileged access to mutually recognized concerns or solutions. . . .” Nancy Fraser argues, complimenting Dewey’s notion of publics, that the crucial discursive work necessary for effective participation and subsequent transformation of the political sphere requires the building of “subaltern counterpublics,” serving as crucial spaces where “members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”⁴⁰ Presently, feminist scholars are studying “an important resurgence . . . of feminist attention to and actions (online and off) around sexual violence and male entitlement,”⁴¹ focusing their analyses specifically on Twitter because its open platform eliminates many of the material barriers that exclude the voices of marginalized women in feminist debates, thereby opening up the possibility that those voices effectively change the conversation.⁴²

Scholars working in feminist media studies have adopted the

⁴⁰ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, nos. 25/26, (1990): 67.

⁴¹ Bernadette Barker-Plummer and Davide Barker-Plummer, “Twitter as a Feminist Resource: #YesAllWomen, Digital Platforms, and Discursive Social Change,” in *Social Movements and Media*, eds. Jennifer Earl and Deana A. Rohlinger (United Kingdom, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018): 95.

⁴² Clark, “Hope in a Hashtag,” 789.

phrase ‘discursive activism’⁴³ to capture the nature of the feminist activism on Twitter. In other words, the #MeToo movement should not be understood as merely a preparation for more organized, on-the-ground protests, rallies, or lobbying. Rather the #MeToo movement is political activism insofar as it aims at changing discourse around the ‘sexual violation’ of women in the media and thereby the broader culture. Alcott introduces the phrase ‘sexual violation’ in order to give us a more nuanced understanding of the nature of the violation that is sexual violence. She explains that by using the larger rubric of ‘sexual violation,’ activists make clearer:

that our concern is broader than what used to be called ‘forcible rape,’ or an action that is physically coerced. To violate is to infringe upon someone, to transgress, and it can also mean to rupture or break. Violations can happen with stealth, with manipulation, with soft words and a gentle touch to a child, or an employee, or anyone who is significantly vulnerable to the offices of others . . . What we are concerned with is a violation of sexual agency, of subjectivity, or our will. We should also be concerned with the ways in which our will has been formed.⁴⁴

The goal of this movement, and important precursors, such as #YesAllWomen, #WhyIStayed, #NotOkay, is to unmask the multiple and shifting strategies of patriarchal ideology that attempt to explain away these acts of violation—i.e., bad actors, mental illness, cultural pathologies—so as to divert attention away from the reality that sexual violations are a systemic problem, not only in our American democracy, but globally.

‘Sexual violation’ of women, as outlined by Alcott, is also helpfully extended by Kate Manne’s conceptualization of ‘misogyny’ as “a property of social environments” rather than the more dominant, convenient, and conventional view of patriarchal dominance, namely,

⁴³ See, for example, Frances Shaw, “Hottest 100 Women,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 27, no. 74, (2012): 373-387.

⁴⁴ Alcott, *Rape and Resistance*, 12.

a warped psychological property of individuals.⁴⁵ Manne further expounds that misogyny:

... functions to enforce and police women's subordination and to uphold male dominance, against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and vulnerability, dominance and disadvantage, as well as disparate material resources, enabling and constraining social structures, institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and so on.⁴⁶

The fruitfulness of Manne's reconstruction⁴⁷ of 'misogyny' and its extension of Alcoff's reconstruction, 'sexual violation,' lies in construing it as a "social function." Manne argues misogyny is "instantiated via norms, practices, institutions and other social structures"⁴⁸ that "polices, punishes, dominates, and condemns those women who are perceived as an enemy or threat to the patriarchy."⁴⁹ Both Manne and Alcoff's analyses of misogyny and sexual violation, moreover, make clear that women, to different degrees, internalize the norms of femininity that misogyny polices. Among such norms are what Manne calls the "feminine-coded goods" of caring for, nurturing, and loving men and their children as well as not competing with men or striving in any way to be achievement-oriented.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2018), 19.

⁴⁶ Manne, *Down Girl*, 19.

⁴⁷ Manne describes her analysis of 'misogyny' as an 'ameliorative project' wherein one determines the meaning of words for pragmatic purposes: "Ameliorative . . . projects . . . require actively making decisions about what to mean with our words. Familiarly, if we want to change the world, we many need to conceptualize it differently. This is particularly the case when it comes to social activities and practices: as social and self-conscious creatures, we are liable to conform to norms enshrined by our basic concepts, categories, and schemas. And when it comes to other people, we are prone to enforcing norms and expectations of which we are uncritical" (42).

⁴⁸ Manne, 19.

⁴⁹ Manne, 33.

⁵⁰ Angela Onwuachi-Willig points to the work of legal scholar Vicki Schultz, who she argues offers a more penetrating formulation of sexual harassment for the

Insofar as women internalize—become—the kind of women that maintain the patriarchal order, the more difficult it becomes for women to recognize when they are violated.

Turning now to a discussion of the #MeToo movement, I plan to draw on both Manne and Alcoff's theoretical work to offer a provisional hypothesis to describe the progressive discursive activist work emerging in this movement as it meets and productively responds to poignant—and sometimes understandably enraged—criticisms of powerful social tendencies rooted in American culture to exclude marginal voices. Namely, what is unfolding as the #MeToo movement continues, is in fact a reconstruction of the meaning of 'misogyny' as the enforcement arm of patriarchal ideology. #MeToo deliberations clarify (a) that the sexual violations of misogyny *selectively* punish women to the degree such women are perceived to pose a risk, (b) that the more immediately public—or rather publicized—acts of misogyny will be white, heterosexual women or the victims of 'famous' men because of the totalitarian habits of attention in mainstream media, and (c) that while the goal of misogyny will always be to seek strategies to silence women, the strategies deployed will differ as dramatically as the life experiences of the women. On this last point, Manne's discussion of a serial rapist, Daniel Holtzclaw, who was also a police officer and specifically targeted African American women, highlights that the "structural barriers and roadblocks" for bringing him and similar attackers to justice are more pernicious because "women who are subject to other forms of disadvantage—for example, racism, poverty, having a criminal record, being a sex worker, and the non-additive results of their various intersections" are targeted precisely because the attacker *knowingly* relies on the pervasive social stereotypes working to discredit these women.⁵¹

courts, namely a type of harassment intended to preserve certain occupations, professions, or achievements, namely the highest paid, the most rewarded, or the most valued, as domains that only men are so constituted to be competent enough to hold (114).

⁵¹ Manne, *Down Girl*, 217.

#MeToo Doesn't Find, But Forges Solidarity

To date, most official stories of the #MeToo movement begin with Alyssa Milano posting, on October 15, 2017, the following:

Me too.

Suggested by a friend: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem."

If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet (@Alyssa_Milano, October 15, 2017).⁵²

Within 24 hours of Milano's tweet, half a million people around the world had tweeted #MeToo⁵³ and, in 12 million posts, 4.7 million people shared #MeToo on Facebook.⁵⁴ Within hours of Milano's first post, however, an African American journalist, Britni Danielle, tweeted a speech given by civil rights activist Tarana Burke in order to rightfully credit Burke as the originator of 'me too' movement years earlier: "Shout out to my girl @taranaburke who has been advocating for assault victims & saying #MeToo for years. metoo. support" (@BritniDWrites, October 15, 2017).⁵⁵ The next day, Milano responded to credit Burke and shared her website, which explained the origin of 'me too.'⁵⁶ Hence, Tarana Burke, as the official story goes, is completely erased as #MeToo goes viral, and then after significant criticisms from women of color pushing back on Burke's erasure—Burke is put forward—albeit not consistently—as the moral

⁵² <http://bit.ly/2ELm1QK>.

⁵³ JR Thorpe, "This is How Many People Have Posted "Me Too" Since October, According to New Data," *Bustle*, December 1, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2qfM7Bk>.

⁵⁴ Andrea Park, "#MeToo Reaches 85 Countries with 1.7M Tweets," *CBS News*, October 24, <http://bit.ly/2OdLmCd>.

⁵⁵ <http://bit.ly/2Azr6aI>.

⁵⁶ Alyssa Milano "I was just. Made aware of an earlier #MeToo movement, and the origin story is equal parts heartbreaking and inspiring" (@Alyssa_Milano, October 15, 2017), <http://bit.ly/2Jn97XJ>.

voice and energy behind “me too.”⁵⁷ This is essentially the official story of how the #MeToo movement started—one can find it in most newspaper accounts—even Wikipedia.⁵⁸ This ‘official’ account of the viral #MeToo, however, leaves a lot out, in fact much worth going over, in order to demonstrate how vibrant discursive activism on Twitter is and was before Milano’s #MeToo Tweet.

Weeks before Alyssa Milano famously tweeted her call to survivors to post “me too,” the *New York Times*⁵⁹ and the *New Yorker*⁶⁰ broke stories exposing Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein’s 30-year history of unimpeded sexual predation. Responding to the wide publication of Weinstein’s history of violations against actors, and the many persons and institutions covering up this egregious behavior, actor Rose McGowan—Milano’s co-star from the series *Charmed*—took to Twitter to stir actors to come forward, break the silence, and show the depth and depravity of Hollywood. In fact, McGowan first turned to Twitter in 2015 precisely to find a public forum where she could expose the misogyny in Hollywood and beyond.⁶¹ So after the *Times* story broke on October 5, 2017, McGowan predictably and reliably was on Twitter calling out various players in Hollywood and asking why so many Hollywood women were silent, for example, “Ladies of Hollywood, your silence is deafening,” (@RoseMcGowan, October 6, 2017).⁶² In fact, on October 7, 2017, McGowan specifically called out Milano on Twitter for not speaking up publicly about the Weinstein story, and some of McGowan’s followers tweeted at

⁵⁷ For example, *Time Magazine* crowned #MeToo as the “person of the year,” and included profiles of a variety of women beyond Hollywood, including Tarana Burke. But, *Time* did not place Burke on the cover of the magazine. This illustrates perfectly the inconsistent attention the mainstream media pays to Tarana Burke. See

⁵⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Me_Too_movement.

⁵⁹ Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2Az7wM0>.

⁶⁰ Ronan Farrow, “From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein’s Accusers Tell Their Stories,” *New Yorker*, October 10, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2zamxBS>. The story broke online first and was published in the October 23, 2017 issue.

⁶¹ Rose McGowan, *Brave*, (New York, Harper One, 2018), 209-225.

⁶² <http://bit.ly/2StKUU4>.

Milano as well for her perceived silence.⁶³ Milano responded directly to McGowan on Twitter,⁶⁴ and then, on October 9, 2017 followed up with a public statement⁶⁵ explaining why she chose not to speak up directly about the Weinstein scandal.

Entertainment news,⁶⁶ and some mainstream news,⁶⁷ started picking up McGowan's tweets, often tagged with #RoseArmy, and referred to her as the "voice of Weinstein resistance." Over a series of days, McGowan essentially revealed that she was raped by Weinstein,⁶⁸ called for his board to resign, called out Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos⁶⁹ for his role of funding Weinstein's projects, called out Ben Affleck⁷⁰ for abetting and enabling Weinstein's behavior, all to have Twitter Security lock her out of her account.⁷¹ After McGowan posted a screenshot on Instagram with the message from Twitter Security explaining she broke the rules and was therefore suspended from posting for 12 hours,⁷² many of her followers and celebrity

⁶³ DeAnn Welker, "With @Alyssa_Milano often rightfully calling out the wrongs against women, her silence in support of Charmed co-star @rosemcgowan is deafening," (@deannw, October 8, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2KwWfPu>.

⁶⁴ Alyssa Milano, "@rosemcgowan I hope you don't feel that I haven't been supportive. I love you and all you stand for. Text me if you need anything." (@Alyssa_Milano, October 8, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2T14ah2>.

⁶⁵ <http://bit.ly/2RpExQh>.

⁶⁶ See Ryan Parker, "Rose McGowan Calls for Weinstein Co. Board to Resign," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 8, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2DPFEWN> and Meg Watson, "Rose McGowan Is Leading An Uprising Against Hollywood 'Bros' After The Weinstein Scandal," *Junkee*, October 10, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2r2DYAJ>.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Stav Ziv, "The Men of Hollywood Don't Own Women: Rose McGowan Becomes Voice of Weinstein Resistance," *Newsweek*, October 9, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2BqxKAF>.

⁶⁸ <https://bit.ly/2Re7sXV>.

⁶⁹ "@jeffbezos I told the head of your studio that HW raped me. Over & over I said it. He said it hadn't been proven. I said I was the proof." (@RoseMcGowan, October 12, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2Sp31KC>.)

⁷⁰ See <https://bit.ly/2ySMMvi> and <https://bit.ly/2SvhZ0Z>.

⁷¹ Anna Livsey, "Rose McGowan Suspended from Twitter after Ben Affleck Tweets," *Guardian* October 12, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2zhD06D>.

⁷² Rose McGowan (@rosemcgowan), "TWITTER HAS SUSPENDED ME. THERE ARE POWERFUL FORCES AT WORK. BE MY VOICE. #ROSEARMY #whywomendontreport," Instagram photo,

friends, such as the now deceased Celebrity Chef Anthony Bourdain and Actor Jessica Chastain, began to criticize Twitter's corporate actions.⁷³ Kelly Ellis, a software engineer, proposed a boycott of Twitter, which quickly caught on and was set for October 13, 2017,⁷⁴ prompting mainstream media outlets⁷⁵ to pick up the story:

Individuals opting out doesn't seem to make a dent. What if #WomenBoycottTwitter for one day (along with men who stand for us? (@justkelly_ok, October 12, 2017).⁷⁶

The organization of this boycott was quickly met with pushback from women of color and prominent black women activists, such as filmmaker Ava DuVernay.

DuVernay's criticism is representative of an aspect of the #MeToo story that is insufficiently discussed in either the mainstream media, or academia,⁷⁷ which illustrates that hashtag feminism⁷⁸ events

October 12, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Kv17Y1>.

⁷³ Abid Rahman, Jackie Strause, and Ryan Parker, "Twitter Suspends McGowan's Account," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 11, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2QX39Dd>.

⁷⁴ Michelle Castillo, "Some Women Call for a Boycott of Twitter After Actress Rose McGowan is Partially Suspended," *CNBC*,

October 12, 2017, <https://cnb.cx/2DPyp0M>.

⁷⁵ See Nellie Bowles and Cara Buckley, "Rose McGowan's Twitter Account Locked After Posts About Weinstein," *New York Times*, October 12, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2DSuy34> and Abby Ohlheiser, "Rose McGowan Blocked from Twitter After Tweeting about Harvey Weinstein and Ben Affleck," *Washington Post*, October 12, 2017, <https://wapo.st/2KqoL5e>.

⁷⁶ <http://bit.ly/2BqLWJN>

⁷⁷ For example, Angela Onwuachi-Willig's timeline of when black women first started criticizing the idea of a Twitter Boycott on to support Rose McGowan's harassment is incorrect. Onwuachi-Willig reports: "Just months before the October 2017 resurgence of the #MeToo movement, black women strongly criticized what they viewed as a doubled standard," namely that thousands had quickly organized in solidarity for Rose McGowan, but no such organization occurred for actor Leslie Jones or ESPN journalist Jemele Hill, both of whom were harassed on Twitter. See Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "What About #UsToo?," 111.

⁷⁸ See Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller, "#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture through Digital Feminist Activism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25, no. 2 (2018): 237-239 for an explanation of 'hashtag feminism.'

erupting over sexual violation, always involve, what Nancy Fraser above calls, ‘counterpublics,’ that is contestation of certain strategies (in this case, boycotting Twitter) for combatting sexual violation and meanings of feminist solidarity (e.g., ‘white women solidarity’). In Deweyan terms, DuVernay’s tweet is exemplary of democratic communication that recovers or retrieves important, vital, and presently missing data necessary for problem-solving. Despite the growing momentum for #WomenBoycottTwitter and the likelihood that many women would sign off on October 13th, DuVernay nonetheless decided to tweet the following on the designated boycott day:

Calling white women allies to recognize conflict of #WomenBoycottTwitter for women of color who haven’t received support on similar issues (@ava, October 13, 2017).⁷⁹

Some initially responded positively to DuVernay’s tweet with criticisms of the very idea of ‘silence’ as anathema to feminist activism, essentially that silence was a particularly counterproductive strategy for feminist activism.⁸⁰ But those criticisms missed DuVernay’s target, which was to bring awareness to the ubiquity of harassment that women of color face on social media, including Twitter. Clarkisha Kent, a journalist for *The Root*, expounded on DuVernay’s point:

I caught wind of this boycott Thursday evening (the night before) and briefly considered it when I thought: What sense does it make to protest being silenced . . . by being silent? It sounds like some rhetorical circle jerk, but think about it: If the powers that be want you to shut the fuck up (especially in online spaces like Twitter), why would you do that? Why give them what they want?

⁷⁹ <https://bit.ly/2L3P9IU>

⁸⁰ See, for example, <https://bit.ly/2RLd9Nc> or <https://bit.ly/2rAyqOh> or Geraldine Walsh, “I Stand with Rose McGowan, but I Don’t Support the Twitter Boycott. Women Need to Shout Louder Than Ever, Not Silence Ourselves,” *Independent*, October 13, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2QF9VgL>.

To black femmes like me, it appeared to be counterintuitive, but also showed one thing:

White women are often the only people who can afford to stay silent.

That silence was an option to begin with proved that point, but it also showed the immense cognitive dissonance white feminists display when they try to engage in matters of social justice.

For black women, silence is often equatable to death. We go through enough silencing, suppression and harassment over our voices day in and day out . . . So who exactly thought it wise to tell us that we should totally volunteer to give up our voices for the day? Hmm?⁸¹

DuVernay's tweet garnered valuable responses that the mainstream media mostly missed,⁸² for example, the paltry attention being paid to people still suffering in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria,⁸³ the inhumane abuse Leslie Jones endured on Twitter after the remake of *Ghostbusters*⁸⁴—especially from Milo Yiannopoulos who though

⁸¹ Clarkisha Kent, "#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, Part 2: On Rose McGowan and the Continued Failure of White Feminism," *The Root*, October 17, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2QleehT>.

⁸² See Anna Codrea-Rado and Amie Tsang, "Twitter Split on Boycott Over Platform's Move Against Rose McGowan," *New York Times*, October 13, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2gCMXUy>. These journalists nod to DuVernay's tweet but focus mainly on the criticisms that silence is not the way to protest sexual violence. Less mainstream outlets paid some attention to these counter-protests, or in Fraser's terms, counterpublics, such as, *Huffington Post*, *NBCBLK*, *Bustle*, and *Vox*.

⁸³ For example, Rosa A. Clemente, former Green Party candidate for Vice President, tweeted in response to DuVernay, "And at this time? When how many women in Puerto Rico are in full crisis right now and they are radio silent? #PRontheMAP" (@rosaclemente, October 13, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2QK11i5>.

⁸⁴ See Nicky Woolf, "Leslie Jones Bombarded with Racist Tweets After *Ghostbusters* Opens," *The Guardian*, July 19, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2zIOi5F> and Rich McCormick, "Ghostbusters Star Leslie Jones Calls for Stronger Twitter Guidelines after Racist Abuse," *The Verge*, July 19, 2016 and Anna Silman, "A Timeline of Leslie Jones's Horrific Online Abuse," *The Cut*, August 24, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Gej4cl>.

banned from Twitter nonetheless earned a lucrative book deal,⁸⁵ and the suspending of Jemele Hill from ESPN for political comments she made on Twitter, including:

Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself w/ other white supremacists (@jemelehill, September 11, 2017).

DuVernay's tweet enables me to focus on two important things that I will discuss in turn. First, many women of color, either responding to her criticism of the boycott or motivated by their own concerns, created a counter-protest, or counterpublic, on October 13, 2017 with various hashtags crafted to celebrate women of color, such as #AmplifyWomen, #WOCAffirmation, #WomenShoutOnTwitter, and #HappyBlackGirlDay. Secondly, DuVernay's tweet inspired a discussion of the importance of intersectionality as crucial for effective solidarity efforts, a discussion that returned again when Milano tweeted #MeToo.

The night before DuVernay's tweet, April Reign⁸⁶ former attorney and media presence, famous for starting the #OscarsSoWhite, decided to respond to #WomenBoycottTwitter with the following set of tweets:

What I would like to do is amplify the WOC #OnHere who are doing the work. I don't know if that is threads or convos or businesses or what. (@ReignOfApril, October 12, 2017).⁸⁷

And then she followed with the next two tweets that opened up an opportunity for women of color to celebrate their accomplishments during the #WomenBoycottTwitter day:

⁸⁵ Joanna Robinson, "The Troll Who Helped Torment Leslie Jones Off Twitter Just Landed a Massive Book Deal," *Vanity Fair*, December 29, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2QF9VgL>.

⁸⁶ Lilly Workneh, "Meet April Reign, The Activist Who Created #OscarsSoWhite," *Huffington Post*, February 27, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Gb9XsZ>.

⁸⁷ <https://bit.ly/2EcjT2v>.

So that's what I'm going to do. You on your sh*t? You doing something you're proud of? You selling stuff? Hit me. I'll retweet. Let's go. (@ReignOfApril)⁸⁸

and

The hashtag I'll be using is #WOCAffirmation. Shout out sistas that are doing the damn thing. Promote them. Hit me so I can RT. Lift us up. (@ReignOfApril)⁸⁹

Reign's #WOCAffirmation unleashed a procession of voices from women, who typically feel erased, ignored, certainly underrepresented, stereotyped, and underestimated. Under the #WOCAffirmation, women shared their unrecognized achievements; it opened a space of celebration as one kind of response to what felt like yet another betrayal by white feminists asking for their solidarity without ever rallying around, defending, or uplifting women of color when they desperately need it. Among the responses to Reign's call, women shared their podcasts, journalism, gamer blogs, video production companies, Ph.D. areas, photography, art, children's literature, activism to change various professions to be more representative, film companies, culinary talents, beauty products, comedy writing, activism on prison reform, marketing firms, etc. Among the many uplifting and inspiring tweets on #WOCAffirmation was this:

I am affirming YOU, @ReignOfApril, 4 starting #WOCAffirmation hashtag. I'm literally sitting here w/gr8ful tears threatening to spill over. (@MorenikeGO, October 13, 2017)⁹⁰

Writing for *theGrio.com*, Demetria Irwin characterized this

⁸⁸ <https://bit.ly/2L9hOWt>.

⁸⁹ <https://bit.ly/2L819mi>.

⁹⁰ <https://bit.ly/2A11SSb>.

‘counterpublic’ day as follows:

“[w]hile decidedly non-woke white feminists took the day off of Twitter, women of color had a bountiful day affirming themselves and their sisters.”⁹¹

The other direction of counter-protests was aimed squarely at the failure of the mostly white women who promoted and organized #WomenBoycottTwitter to reach out and build great coalitions and solidarity with women of color. Journalist Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff, after first admitting her initial support for Rose McGowan’s unjustifiable treatment by Twitter Security, went on to further explain why she ultimately decided to reject the boycott:

when awful things have happened to women of colour [sic] in the past, there hasn't been the same levels of support. It reminded me of what the amazing mother of Heather Heyer said after the death of her daughter, who was killed by a white supremacist in Charlottesville earlier this year: ‘A white girl had to die for people to pay attention.’⁹²

Brinkhurst-Cuff’s highlight of Heather Heyer’s death symbolizes well the variety of criticisms that many of black women and women of color expressed about #WomenBoycottTwitter, namely, that groundswells for feminist solidarity are motivated by abusive or deadly actions to white women, especially famous white women.⁹³ The daily, downright quotidian abuse and harassment that women of color face—these protestors were making plain—never transform into, what Rebecca Traister, who was describing the #MeToo movement,

⁹¹ Demetria Irwin, “Black Women School Twitter on Misogynoir with #WOCAffirmation,” October 16, 2017, <https://on.thegrio.com/2Pyng5O>.

⁹² Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff, “Black Women Were Right Not To Join #WomenBoycottTwitter,” *Dazed*, October 14, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2EcInbV>.

⁹³ Stephanie Downs, “Ava DuVernay’s #WomenBoycottTwitter Tweet Highlights One of the Major Issues With the Protest,” October 13, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2zSSRKw>.

as “an extremely hot match” that gets dropped on a “tinderbox.”⁹⁴ Assaults on women of color never boil over into a movement that spills into national media to result in meaningful political change. Among the tweets expressing this frustration were:

Just getting caught up on #WomenBoycottTwitter & my first thought was what about Jemele? Where WERE they? Why not the same robust support for her/US. I was conflicted & scrolling. Then I saw this tweet. THANK you for addressing the giant pink elephant. (@SweetKixx, October 13, 2017).⁹⁵

and more pointedly:

Remember Leslie Jones was abused right off Twitter & not a word from WW. Proving 1 again WW r allies 2 only women who share their skin color. I lack any trust in their allyship anymore, not after helping elect 45. They need 2 step it up or b painted with same brush (@PrezObama4eva, October 13, 2017)⁹⁶

Years before this counter-protest to #WomenBoycottTwitter, blogger Mikki Kendall, coined the potent #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen,⁹⁷ which aptly captured the tone deafness of the call for this boycott. Many black feminists pointed out important facts they wanted white feminists to reckon with, namely, that 52% of White women voted for Donald Trump, whereas 94% of African American women and 69% of Latino women voted for Hillary Clinton⁹⁸; moreover, among Weinstein’s accusers, he publicly denied

⁹⁴ Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 38.

⁹⁵ <https://bit.ly/2Gcnj8h>.

⁹⁶ <https://bit.ly/2UAcwrB>.

⁹⁷ “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen Creator, Mikki Kendal, Speaks About Women of Color, Feminism (video),” *Huffpost*, Black Voices, August 13, 2013, <http://bit.ly/2Ogk0eO>. See also, Theodore Ross, “Mikki Kendall and Her Online Beefs with White Feminists,” *Vice*, May 29, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2OXt2m5>.

⁹⁸ CNN Politics, “Exit Polls,” November 23, 2016, <https://cnn.it/2Q5miPV>.

only one of his victims, Lupita Nyong'o⁹⁹; and, that the stakes for women of color speaking out publicly about sexual misconduct are much higher than for white women.¹⁰⁰

Within the #WOCAffirmation thread, a predictable quarrel surfaced wherein white women either took offense to DuVernay's tweet or expressed confusion. Consider the following discussion as an example of one white woman's confusion and resulting frustration:

When was there a similar issue where a women of colour's [sic] twitter account was suspended? (@LibbyFelicity, October 13, 2017)¹⁰¹

Four days before #WomenBoycottTwitter, ESPN suspended Jemele Hill for a tweet that supported the Dallas Cowboy players who had been told they would be benched by Jerry Jones, their owner, should they "disrespect the flag." Hill's tweet¹⁰² suggested that those who support the players boycott Jones' advertisers. ESPN then suspended her for violating their internal social media policy. Libby Felicity's question thus got the following two responses:

Jemele hill was suspended from her career and there was no mass call for a boycott lol (@CampKaf, October 13, 2017)¹⁰³
and

Wow. So many. The fact that it never hit your radar is exactly the point Madam Ava is making. (@Ivy_Tarte, October 13, 2017)¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ See Gillian B. White, "The Glaring Blindspot of the 'Me Too' Movement," *The Atlantic*, November 22, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2A09plk>.

¹⁰⁰ Errin Haines Whack, "Stakes are Higher' for Women of Colour Reporting Powerful Men for Sexual Abuse, Activists Say," *Toronto Star*, November 18, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2EQ7LGv>.

¹⁰¹ <https://bit.ly/2zUChKj>.

¹⁰² <https://bit.ly/2CTRomt>.

¹⁰³ <https://bit.ly/2CTRomt>.

¹⁰⁴ <https://bit.ly/2EiEq5s>.

The naiveté on display in Libby Felicity's tweet does get straight to the heart of DuVernay's criticism, as well as the deep problems with contemporary feminism, namely, the privilege white women have to simply not know the unabating cruel realities facing women of color, bi and trans persons, migrant women, or indigenous women. Ashley C. Ford offered, what I think is one of the most even-handed analysis of the problems with #WomenBoycottTwitter:

The women who are boycotting Twitter today are not bad or wrong. The women who have decided not to boycott Twitter today are not bad or wrong. This isn't a moment to make accusations of divisiveness or maliciousness. This is a moment to recognize when the women with the most power forget or choose not to organize with those who have the least. The Twitter boycott may be just as effective as they'd hoped it would be. The people in charge who have never listened to us before, might just listen to us today. This may very well be the moment they decide to take harassment concerns seriously and ban trolls even if they hold the highest office in the nation. *But imagine how effective it could have been if the people who had organized this protest considered their sisters who had a different point of view, and a darker shade of skin. Imagine what that kind of care could have inspired, and how it could have moved well beyond Twitter, and online conversions (my emphasis).*¹⁰⁵

Ford's point here is getting at what I want to argue concerning the hopefulness in hashtag feminism, following Dewey's conception of publics and democratic communication and drawing on feminist work from Fraser, Manne and Alcoff, namely, the platform of Twitter creates opportunities for counterpublics to contest the default 'white feminist' perspective. In fact, during the counter-protest to #WomenBoycottTwitter, counter-protestors spent some time and energy trying to remind white feminists—once again—of the value of intersectionality, which is a prominent body of feminist theory that

¹⁰⁵ Ashley C. Ford, "Why I'm Not Boycotting Twitter Today," *Refinery 29*, October 13, 2017, <https://r29.co/2LeYMhA>.

emerged from the work of Critical Race Theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw.¹⁰⁶ Crenshaw argues that sexual and racial discrimination law assumes that in cases of sex, the plaintiff is white and in cases of race, the plaintiff is a black male; in other words, the concept, 'sex discrimination,' though seemingly generic and capacious, when practically applied in court decisions,¹⁰⁷ demonstrates the base assumption that one can substitute the experience of any given middle-class able-bodied, heterosexual white woman to accurately represent the experience of all women and vice versa along the lines of race, which becomes even more problematic if one considers the experience of black men to be indistinguishable from black women, especially trans or queer black women. Using multiple concrete metaphors to demonstrate how ineffective these assumptions are to adequately address and remediate harassment and sexual assault, Crenshaw argues that until we change the image in our head of what constitutes a *typical* case of sexual assault then our current practices will only, if they even accomplish that, help white women.¹⁰⁸ Consider the following metaphor:

Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked—feet standing on shoulders—with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor

¹⁰⁶ See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8, 1989.

¹⁰⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 141-150.

¹⁰⁸ The recent special hearing of the Senate Judiciary concerning Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony that Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her demonstrates that we are far from effectively addressing sexual violation. Dr. Blasey Ford was, many would argue, one of the most credible witnesses insofar as she was white, upper-class, married, well-educated, and from the same social circles as Judge Kavanaugh.

above which is only those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that ‘but for’ the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who—due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below—are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch.

As this analogy translates for Black women, the problem is that they can receive protection only to the extent that their experiences are recognizably similar to those whose experiences tend to be reflected in antidiscrimination doctrine.¹⁰⁹

Intersectionality as an analytical framework for understanding the complex, multi-dimensional sources of oppression and thus, to put this in Deweyan terms, as a framework for better elaborating plural experiences of women who experience sexual violation has moved out of rarefied academic articles, textbooks, college classrooms and into live Twitter hashtag streams.¹¹⁰

In response to DuVernay’s tweet, several of the counter-protestors revived the important discussion of intersectionality—the need for white women to remember to ‘check their privilege’ before rushing headlong into political organizing and protesting on behalf of all women. For example, in response to some white feminists making pleas that “all women stick together,” were the following responses:

¹⁰⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 151-152.

¹¹⁰ See, Suzannah Weiss, “8 Tweets That Explain Intersectionality, Because Feminism Isn’t Just About Women,” *Bustle*, September 26, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2BqAU67>.

“Recognizing issues that affect women of color, in the context of intersectional feminism, is more uniting than dividing” (@NoTotally, October 13, 2017)¹¹¹

and

“Not reflecting on these things excludes WOC, dividing women” (@NoTotally, October 13, 2017)¹¹²

Unfortunately, many of these calls to think and act intersectionally were and continue to be responded to with defensiveness. To illustrate the texture of defensiveness, consider the following exchange:

“Women are women. There are no colors . . . just equals.” (@aesports, October 13, 2017)¹¹³

Predictably, this tweet did not ingratiate its author, Kathe Evans, to the majority of women in DuVernay’s thread. Her tweet essentially reinforced the idea that the middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, white woman’s experience was the generic woman’s experience—to deny that women’s experiences are dramatically plural, especially given multiple axes of oppression—is to reinforce white supremacy. Another dispute within DuVernay’s hashtag discussed directly the fact that 55% of white women voted for President Trump, initiated by a white woman with the following:

Don’t let race divide women from each other. Excepting the inexplicable 55% white women who betrayed all of us by voting for Trump (WTF?), we are all in the same fight. Personally I will try harder to lift up all women of color who’ve been so repeatedly disrespected & abused. (@Melissa Jo Peltier, October 13, 2017).

¹¹¹ <https://bit.ly/2S5JMFx>.

¹¹² <https://bit.ly/2EnxkwC>.

¹¹³ <https://bit.ly/2SUKt4>.

Peltier's tweet is important because while she is trying to show understanding and solidarity, her failure to really reckon with the fact of the "inexplicable 55%" is a serious obstacle to building solidarity. One, very understated, but effective response to her tweet goes as follows:

That 55% is a pretty huge thing tho (@originalspin, October 13, 2017).¹¹⁴

Chatelaine Tayo Bero, writing for *Flare*, further elaborated on the significance of the 55%:

[i]n 2016, the majority of white American women voted for Donald Trump, a man who had been accused of sexual assault and literally been caught on tape saying powerful men could do with women's bodies as they pleased. It didn't make sense how anyone could justify making this guy the president. And then it hit me. To a certain segment of the population, Trump is, at worst, a predator and misogynist and, at best, badly behaved and impetuous. The reality is that white, straight, middle-class women will simply never face the consequences of that political decision in the same way as their counterparts of colour [sic].¹¹⁵

Essentially, one of the clear messages of the women who refused #WomenBoycottTwitter, and who thus decided to focus energies once again on pointing out that women do not experience oppression in the same way and therefore the strategies for combating oppression require a diverse set of voices and experiences, was a reminder that solidarity must be forged on far more than a shared gender/sex identity.

Returning to the "extremely hot match" on a "tinderbox,"

¹¹⁴ <https://bit.ly/2UTuVQd>.

¹¹⁵ Chatelaine Tayo Bero, "Why We Need to Talk About White Feminism . . . Like, Now," *Flare*, December 3, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2ECrokf>.

which is how Traister described Milano's #MeToo post, we see again hopeful signs of counterpublics pushing against the default #SolidarityIsforWhiteWomen trajectory of activism around sexual violation. Above, I mentioned the 'official story,' wherein Milano, with her Hollywood platform, popularized Tarana Burke's important phrase for promoting healing and solidarity for survivors, "me too." The fact that Milano could turn this hashtag viral without any knowledge of the decade-long work of Tarana Burke certainly did not go unnoticed among women of color on Twitter. Burke herself was quoted saying:

['me too'] wasn't built to be a viral campaign or a hashtag that is here today and forgotten tomorrow . . . It was a catchphrase to be used from survivor to survivor to let folks know that they were not alone and that a movement for radical healing was happening and possible.¹¹⁶

Given that what many participants and onlookers alike have found valuable in the #MeToo movement, namely, the sharing of hitherto private moments of violation in search of solidarity—a specific kind of cooperative action in service of opposing a violent culture—the persistent blind spots of white feminism, which fail to consider the experiences of women of color or trans/queer women, for example, threaten to prevent necessary communication as long as the movement continues.

On the theme of solidarity, Milano, reflecting on the potency of #MeToo—especially given its viral status, explains

. . . when you see a friend, maybe a friend you've known for 35 years, post the words, 'Me too,' it opens up a dialogue. It allows you to say, 'I didn't know that. Tell me about it, if you want to. How can I support you?' To be able to take your experiences out, dissect them and share your stories with others is a powerful thing. We have communities of like-

¹¹⁶ Zahara Hill, "A Black Woman Created the 'Me Too' Campaign Against Sexual Assault 10 Years Ago," *Ebony*, October 18, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2AebSrc>.

mindedness for pretty much everything—religious communities, Fantasy Football, everything of interest to human beings. But because we’ve been silent—and silenced—about this issue, we don’t realize there is a community out there that’s ready to embrace and support us.¹¹⁷

Milano here rightly points out that the starting point for solidarity is dialogue. She also rightly notes that such dialogue has the power to create a community—a Deweyan public. However, what Milano and many other prominent white women so-called blazing this movement missed about solidarity is that the community they build will be very small unless you are willing to dialogue with those who are not just your friends, nor who simply like-minded. Gillian B. White, reflecting on the many missteps of #MeToo movement asserts:

[s]olidarity, at its most basic level . . . requires a level of trust and an understanding of shared goals that are not always present. Demanding it without attending to the nuances of privilege ignores the spotty track record that white women have when it comes to being allies to people of color.¹¹⁸

Moreover, as Burke points out above, ‘me too’ was a grassroots, intimate, catchphrase to be passed from survivor to survivor, specifically the most vulnerable from underprivileged communities, and in being appropriated by a powerful white woman, who originally did not know its function or originator, everything that she tried to build felt erased, ignored, and ripped off only in service of helping the women, as Crenshaw put it, closest to the ceiling get through the so-called hatch.¹¹⁹ Burke noted:

In *this* instance, the celebrities who popularized the hashtag didn’t take a moment to see if there was work already being

¹¹⁷ Alyssa Milano, “How We Can Help Women Come Forward,” *Time*, October 18, 2017. <https://ti.me/2AysDxU>.

¹¹⁸ Gillian B. White, “The Glaring Blind Spot of the ‘Me Too’ Movement.”

¹¹⁹ Zahara Hill, *Ebony*, October 18, 2017.

done . . . I don't fault them for that part, I don't think it was intentional but somehow sisters still managed to get diminished or erased in these situations. A slew of people raised their voices so that that didn't happen.¹²⁰

Here Burke stresses what should not be lost as we evaluate the success of #MeToo Movement—something that at the time of this writing is far from clear—namely, Twitter enabled a counterpublic to successfully impact the shape, face, and trajectory of this movement. Of course, in saying this, I am not saying that Twitter ensured, once and for all, that #MeToo would not devolve into another form of 'white feminism.' However, no oppositional movement, understood in Deweyan terms is ever static or finished.

In this article, I have attempted to argue that the specific social media platform Twitter has thus far provided more optimal conditions for a Deweyan public to emerge to oppose sexual violation and misogyny, as articulated by Alcoff and Manne respectively. As I argued above, Twitter significantly lowers the material barriers for individuals to participate in conversations, and thus typically marginalized voices have a greater likelihood to shape and alter the direction of feminist discursive activism unfolding under a given hashtag. By no means am I claiming here that Twitter or #MeToo have solved, once and for all, the obstacles facing the cultivation of desperately needed democratic habits of communication and intelligent inquiry for problem solving. My claim is that we can see, in real-time, a Deweyan public emerging on the open platform of Twitter that is responsive to criticism and contestation over important meanings of concepts being addressed. As such, we have some occasion for hope.

¹²⁰ Zahara Hill, *Ebony*, October 18, 2017.

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