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Social Media Meets Social Justice: The Role of the Hashtag in the Contemporary Conversation on Race

by Deborah F. Kadiri

Because race is a social construct, it informs every sociocultural aspect of life for people of color. When it comes to the black American, the precedent that has been advertised by the dominant society is that black lives are of inferior, if any, value. A long history of enslavement and dehumanization speaks to this fact. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for instance, saw the rise of blackface minstrelsy, as white actors caked their faces in black soot and acted in a mocking imitation of African-American song, dance, and speech that reinforced blacks' status as second-class citizens in a post-slavery society. As Eric Lott notes in his article, "Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture," "[T]he minstrel show indeed seems a transparently racist curiosity, a form of leisure that, in inventing and ridiculing the slow-witted but irrepressible 'plantation darky' and the foppish 'northern dandy negro,' conveniently rationalized racial oppression … [and] took such distortions as authentic" (3). Yet, these stereotypical portrayals, established by the dominant white society, were not new. As Sterling A. Brown notes in his 1933 essay entitled "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," such stereotypes date back to the days of slavery and the depiction of African-American characters in many white-authored texts. He writes:

> The Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life. The majority of books about Negroes merely stereotype Negro character…. It can be said, however, that all of these stereotypes are marked either by exaggeration or omissions; that they all agree in stressing the Negro's divergence from an Anglo-Saxon norm to the flattery of the latter; they could all be used, as they probably are, as justification of racial proscription; they all illustrate dangerous species generalizing from a few particulars recorded by a single observer from a restricted point of view—which is itself generally dictated by the desire to perpetuate a stereotype. (Brown 180)

Historically, the marginalization of the black community, however, was not restricted to popular culture and the stereotypes that it engendered. As a result, race has remained the one social construct that is responsible for the most recurring causes of national controversy in both virtual and public spaces. The perceived inferiority of blacks has also manifested in violence against black bodies, as evident in February 2012 when a young, unarmed black teenager was shot and killed for reasons that still remain unclear to this day. The murder of Trayvon Martin at the hands of a self-proclaimed neighborhood watchman, who was not held responsible, led many Americans to question the interests of the justice system. In the wake of the trial that ensued, many black Americans came to terms with the harsh reality that their best interest is not a priority of said system—an event that contributed to the development of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement today and its pursuits of the justice long denied blacks.

The nature of contemporary discourse on race is informed by these instances that mark pivotal moments in our history. After all, such instances served as the impetus behind the evolution of discourse associated with the Civil Rights Movement into today's #BlackLivesMatter Movement —a shift that exemplifies the recurring realization that the social construct of race is problematic for people of color. With the passing of time, however, social constructs are often challenged to the point of widespread rejection. This is evident today as the primary perspective of the conversation has shifted from one that previously promoted integration to a fault to one that now focuses on both the positive and negative effects of the differences that undeniably exist between white and black Americans. If, as novelist and playwright Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote in 1839, "The pen [was] mightier than the sword" (89), as the Internet has become a primary channel through which information is funneled to the public, the power behind the pen has taken on a new form in directing this conversation. As a result, many of the texts that emerge out of our culture do so in conjunction with evolving technologies and the features available through social media platforms. The hashtag, which had its inception on Twitter, has become a particularly influential feature in the dissemination of information and specifically in the facilitation of the national conversation on race.

Historicizing the Hashtag

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the technical term for the hashtag symbol is *octothorpe*. In his analysis, the Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst points out that the octothorpe is a "traditional symbol for *village*" (Houston). The new terminology is not indicative of a reinvention of this symbol; rather, it simply factors in the discovery of a new function for it. Similarly, the #BlackLivesMatter Movement is not indicative of a reinvention of the Civil Rights Movement; it simply factors in the development of new functions for it. The OED's reference to the hashtag as an organizing center speaks to the practicality of the hashtag as a universal symbol around which communication and engagement can occur. The marriage of the hashtag with today's movement has been prolific for this reason.

The hashtag is also associated with the United Kingdom's symbol for the pound. This implies an overt relationship to the exchange of currency and the mutual ownership that participants in that exchange share. The hashtag is comparable because of the exchange of the currency of thoughts, feelings, facts, and ideas that it propagates. It represents the opportunity to use the agency birthed out of the union of a platform and a voice. This is especially important within the context of challenging the validity of social constructions of race because it takes conversations that may have been occurring within private spaces and projects them directly into the public audience where they cannot be ignored and can actively contribute to the writing of a new narrative for people of color. As Makeba Lavan writes in "The Negro Tweets His Presence: Black Twitter as Social and Political Watchdog," "In the digital age, social media tools like Twitter—a subscriber based micro-blogging site that allows for instantaneous visibility and therefore increased social capital/power—permit the articulation of a diversity of voices as well as new forms of civic participation" (56). The hashtag affords us the social and political capital to participate in this exchange and adds value to these meaning-making and truth-seeking processes.

Hashtags are used on web-based and social media platforms to identify all corresponding activity by a word or phrase that is preceded by the hashtag symbol. Any such word or phrase becomes a searchable link that ties tagged activity to every other occurrence of that particular tag. This allows for the virtual gathering of related content based on keywords. As a result, the hashtag is associated with a contemporary culture of globalization because its reach is not confined by the traditional boundaries and limitations of communication. As long as an Internet connection is available, a hashtag can unite people anywhere in the world over any topic in the world. Its use has become increasingly symbolic because of this nucleic property. Because the hashtag is designed to be used on platforms that were already created to allow and promote limitless dialogue among an unchecked number of participants, its accessibility is universal and its potential is widespread.

However, the facilitation of immediacy is arguably the hashtag's most valuable characteristic, as the hashtag itself evidences a new way of knowing and doing.[1] Virtual spaces are becoming the primary venues for social gatherings because of the eradication of extraneous logistics. There is no need to reserve a space and monitor attendance. There is no maximum occupancy due to fire hazards. There are no time constraints. And most importantly, everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute to the conversation. There is no waiting in line to be heard, and the politics of social hierarchies are rendered virtually irrelevant. These are the main reasons why Twitter discussions are rapidly replacing traditional public forums. The hashtag effortlessly capitalizes on the need for these practical solutions to logistical hindrances that have continuously limited the productivity of conversations on race in the past. It bridges the divide that often separates the rhetorical and real social justice-related content that gives rise to a renewed public focus.

The Hashtag as a New Genre

Access to information regarding the disproportionate number of deaths of people of color at the hands of law enforcers has been a prime example of this. Mainstream media often portrays victims of racial marginalization and stereotyping as criminals based upon past infractions, regardless of whether or not they are related to the incidents of fatality—a trend that reinforces the Brute Negro stereotype of the not so distant past. Old rap sheets, school reports reflecting poor academic records, and unsavory photographs are often the contexts in which the highlight reels of primary media reports frame victims of institutionalized racial profiling. For example, this was the case after two police officers fatally shot Tamir Rice, a twelve-year old boy from Cleveland, Ohio, who was playing with a toy gun. Rather than focusing on Tamir's death, the media focused upon his father's criminal history. Fundamental problems such as these necessitate the development of new genres of civil rights literature and engagement that counter the skewed depictions popularized in today's news. In "The Negro Digs up his Past," Arthur Schomburg points to this need dating back to the twentieth century, asserting that:

> The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset. (217)

The use of the hashtag on social media platforms has become the answer to Schomburg's call to counter the flawed portrayals of such victims by generating a new group tradition. As Lavan suggests, "Black Twitter has become a site of counter-narratives and counter-memory, assembling supplementary information that challenges the dominant narrative propagated in traditional media" (57). These counter-narratives are evident in the tweets associated with the top ten Twitter hashtags related to #BlackLivesMatter; #MikeBrown, #Ferguson, #SandraBland, #EricGarner, #BlackTwitter, #Baltimore, #SayHerName, #ICantBreathe, #FreddieGray, and #AllLivesMatter. Because "[t]he most influential users on Black Twitter call attention to prejudice in mainstream narratives … while forcing corrective action" (Lavan 57) using the hashtag, it has become a symbol of empowerment that gives the public access to otherwise unknown complexities of these multifaceted narratives. This is the relevance of the hashtag as a new genre within the context of the national conversation on race.

Ultimately, genres create the classification system for artistic composition. Such artistic endeavors typically have some characteristic form or technique. When it comes to literary genres, fiction and nonfiction are two primary categories. There are several subcategories that organize art by layout, style, theme, content, and so on, but the notion of the hashtag as a new genre is one that comes out of the inability to relegate tagged artistry to the confines of any particular preexisting category. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, after all, can be used to track events, conversations, photographs, paintings, articles, speeches, blog posts, and tweets that were tagged accordingly. Instead of narrowing down searches in order to arrive at one specific result, the hashtag makes them as expansive as possible but still only yields results that have been marked with the specified tag. Entering #BlackLivesMatter into a Google search will yield results that could be classified as poetry, prose, photographs, and so on—all resources that have helped to provide users context for some of their thoughts regarding race and rhetoric. The hashtag thus serves as a point of entry into networks that have been built around the common purpose of having constructive conversations on these issues that have the potential to lead to the activism that can result in long-term change. This quality makes it a viable candidate for a new genre.

Hashtag Activism and the Pursuit of Social Change

According to Phillip Howard, the principle investigator for the Digital Activism Research Project, "'Hashtag activism is what happens when someone tries to raise public awareness of a political issue using some clever or biting keyword on social media…. If your idea—linked to a good hashtag—gains traction you've started a kind of awareness campaign'" (qtd. in Brewster). After the fatal shooting of the unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, community members took to social media with the hashtags #Ferguson and #MikeBrown to not only express their outrage with repeated incidents of police brutality but also to share images and video footage of incidents surrounding the backlash of the tragedy that were not being released to the public through mainstream media and news outlets. With the dramatic increase of direct sources to information, the space that often exists between raw texts and their edited and filtered versions was eliminated, resulting in national outcries for justice.

For many, however, the question of whether or not it is possible to attain concrete and quantifiable evidence of the efficacy of "hashtag activism" remains a concern often raised by those who are hesitant to address such critical social justice issues with contemporary methods. In his article entitled "After Ferguson: Is 'Hashtag Activism' Spurring Policy Changes?," Shaquille Brewster addresses this question by pointing out some of the tangible results that are, in part, due to hashtag activism. Brewster writes,

> After the Ferguson decision, President Obama told peaceful protesters he will personally work with them. Since then, he's requested funding for 50,000 police body cameras, created a task force to get specific recommendations on building trust between communities and law enforcement and invited young leaders to the White House for a meeting in the Oval Office.

Hemly Ordonez, Vice President of Digital Strategy and Mobilization at Fission Strategy, a company that uses digital tools to achieve social change, remarked that this was the first time she had ever seen the president engage with "people who are so close to the ground….. That generally doesn't happen" (qtd. in Brewster). Ordonez, along with many others, acknowledges

the direct effects that the utility of social media has in bridging the divide between social change and those who have the ability to expedite it. Without the public outcry surrounding the shooting of Michael Brown, such action may never have occurred.

The #BlackLivesMatter Movement is therefore an invocation of the demand for regard and respect for black lives, black history, black culture, and black people. As the founders of #BlackLivesMatter articulate, this "ideological and political intervention" of an organization exists as "affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" ("Black Lives"). The hashtag associated with the movement can be classified as a facilitator of inclusion. Communities have the ability to congregate around a mutual purpose. But like many other social media platforms, by way of its design, Twitter allows for people to communicate under the cloak of anonymity if they so choose. This anonymity arguably promotes an environment in which the sharing and exchange of thoughts and ideas can occur without the prejudices that are associated with visual and audible features of difference.

Some would argue that this same feature eradicates any potential for gatekeeping because those with ulterior or opposing motives and agendas have just as much access to the same tools, tactics, and platforms that are being used to seek social justice and policy reform. There are some instances that have helped to mollify this concern regarding the lack of accountability. For example, on December 20, 2013, Justine Sacco, a former senior director of corporate communications at a leading media and Internet company, tweeted a total of sixty-three characters without suspecting that her life would change so quickly as a result. As she boarded a flight to South Africa, she tweeted: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" As her tweet began to circulate, people took to Twitter to express how distasteful such blatant ignorance and racism was, especially coming from someone working in public relations. The hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet began to trend as Twitter activists sought to educate Sacco about the implications of her thoughtless tweet. Before her plane had even landed, Sacco was no longer employed by IAC.

A similar incident occurred in October of 2015, when Erika Escalante, a twenty-year-old student at Arizona State University, tweeted, "Our inner n*gger came out today," after visiting a cotton field with a friend. Erika deleted her tweet once she realized how much attention it was getting, but it had already gone viral and made its way to her employers. Shortly after, the company she was working for tweeted, "We too find this tweet offensive & we are shocked. This does not reflect our values & culture. The intern is no longer with us" (Isagenix). As a result of these unfortunate instances, many companies have begun to implement mandatory cultural information and sensitivity training for their employees—a step toward correcting these social ills that might not have occurred without the rise of the hashtag as a tool of sociocultural critique. These instances, among others, demonstrate how the hashtag facilitates agency that originates in virtual spaces but intersects with real spaces. Its ability to draw public attention to the inherent mentality of race-based violence within the written word makes the hashtag the perfect propellant for a counterculture that is seeking not only to reactively hold people accountable for blatant racism but to also proactively effect lasting changes regarding the type of treatment that people of color will and will not accept from the dominant society. This relationship between the hashtag and social justice activism is especially relevant to the growing body of academics who are seeking to increase their ability to understand, deconstruct, and skillfully use language across genres in order to have difficult but productive social, political, and cultural conversations.

Some would attribute the ongoing impacts of social media activism to the visibility of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. After all, the role of the student activist is one that has repeatedly been at the forefront of many recent social justice demonstrations. Gatherings of students in both virtual and real spaces have undeniably resulted in the implementation of actual change. For example, on November 9, 2015, Tim Wolfe, the former president of the University of Missouri, resigned from his duties as a direct result of students relentlessly demanding the removal of a university leader who would not address repeated concerns regarding an environment of racial hostility. #ConcernedStudent1950 is the corresponding hashtag that was trending throughout the ongoing unrest at the university. Concerned Student 1950 is the name of the activist group that emerged out of the tensions of racial hostility at the University of Missouri. This institution admitted its first black student in 1950, and the group's name was multipurposed, as the hashtag tracked the events surrounding the protests for a different kind of equality sixty-five years later.

Movements that celebrate black culture and people by promoting the validity of black life and countering negative stereotypes are also being repurposed as hashtags. The trending tag #BlackExcellence celebrates the greatness and achievements of black people. #BlackGirlMagic celebrates the beauty of black women and girls in opposition to a popular culture that often

excludes them from the category of a mainstream beauty standard. Most recently, both of these tags have been tied to images of Simone Biles, Simone Manuel, Michelle Carter, Gabby Douglas, and Ibtihaj Muhammad, some of the women of color who are being called the American heroes of the 2016 Olympics. ABC News tweeted, "#BlackGirlMagic takes spotlight at Olympics," along with an article that calls these women black heroines. Likewise, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown was also a popular hashtag of 2016 that sought to make people aware that the media often portrays people of color in an unforgiving and simply inaccurate light. James Poniewozik, a writer for *TIME* magazine, calls this particular tag:

> a simple, ingenious DIY form of media criticism: direct, powerful, and meaningful on many levels. It [makes] the blunt point that every time a media outlet chooses a picture of someone like [Mike] Brown, it makes a statement. It create[s] identification: so many ordinary people—students, servicemen and women, community volunteers—could be made to look like a public menace with one photo dropped in a particular context. And it ma[kes] a particular racial point: that it's so much easier, given our culture's racial baggage, for a teenager of color to be made to look like a "thug" than [a] white teen showing off for a camera the exact same way.

In each case, the awareness of difference is trending with these hashtags, enabling users to celebrate, validate, and respect difference much more than in the past when racial and cultural differences too often sparked long-term abuse. There can never be enough of this. Now more than ever, discussions on race are being sparked in public and private spaces. These conversations are informing education, society, policy, and even our understanding of the cultural competence of our presidential candidates. Despite some of the discomfort surrounding these discussions, it is important that they occur, not only to raise awareness of their necessity but to also create a counterculture that reinforces affirming representations and emphasizes the talents and achievements that people of color contribute to a culture in which they are undeservedly marginalized.

Still, in light of all this talking, there is the pervasive mentality that conversations on Twitter or elsewhere are often unintentional diversions because while they may illuminate, they do not result in the end goal of achieving change. Sanjay Sharma accentuates this point in her article, "Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks, and Contagion." Here she argues that there is a widespread misperception "that Black users of Twitter are immersed in trivialities and banal chatter" (Sharma 52), such as the posting of seemingly endless memes as opposed to serious conversation. The problem, however, is that such conversations are simply being oversimplified as insignificant precursors to effective strategizing for action. Within the context of a national conversation on race, as the example of Tim Wolfe's ousting reveals, the hashtag can be a tool for encouraging effective policy reform—often considered the end goal of any strategies to end racism and racial discrimination. For this reason, it is interesting to see lawmakers and politicians also engaging in these conversations as equal participants through the use of the hashtag.

Opposition to the #BlackLivesMatter Movement

The unfamiliarity of the hashtag as a new genre does contribute to the generational divide that widens with the implementation of contemporary methods of communication and engagement. The overarching goals of the leadership of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement are not much different from those of the leadership of the Black Power and Civil Rights Movements. However, there is a generational divide that highlights the shifts in communication styles through the use of language. Those who participated in civil rights efforts for equality in the past may be justifiably disenfranchised with the way that the #BlackLivesMatter Movement seems to be reestablishing a culture of separate but equal. The notions that we are not all aspiring towards the same things and that we do not all necessarily want to become assimilated and indistinguishable may even be a bit threatening to what was considered the progress of the 1960s. So there is a conscious and intentional generational gap that results from the decision to distance the classic culture from the contemporary counterculture.

In addition to feelings of intimidation associated with the novelty of the marriage of technology and social justice movements, many older activists hold to the idea that non-academic texts are denigrated and cannot be rhetorically dignified. To them, the grandeur and inspiration behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech is far too powerful to be associated in any way with a tweet confined to the limits of 140 characters. The marching of fingers across keyboards is not comparable to the marching of feet across the bridge at Selma. Hashtags and retweets in virtual spaces are not comparable to the physical gatherings of tangible bodies in

the real spaces of churches and at lunch counters. The consensus among some of these thinkers is that there is a kind of irreverence about this ease of access and that the platform of popular culture somehow takes away from the seriousness of purpose.

The rebuttal to this ideology lies in the fact that the contemporary version of the movement is built upon the foundations that were laid in the past. Generations are perpetually being replaced, but many of the same pervasive tensions that resulted in race-based inequalities in the past are still just as prevalent today. These inequalities may present themselves in the forms of microaggressions and racial profiling, but the fact is that they still exist. An old problem that morphs into a more socially acceptable version of itself is not a new problem. The fact that it still remains is evidence that it cannot be solved with an old method, especially since the tools of prejudice and discrimination are evolving as well. The #BlackLivesMatter Movement comes out of this realization. It does not seek to undermine or undervalue past progress or methods; it simply seeks to utilize contemporary tactics to promote access to agency and engagement. By capitalizing on the hashtag's ability to amplify voices, the contemporary movement is employing new methodologies that are pushing an old problem into the public focus once again.

Conclusion

To those who have an acute awareness of the presence of racism in America, the reality is that more often than not, the experiences of their white counterparts cannot be used as a standard or point of equal comparison for black Americans. The concept of racial equality primarily exists in theory alone. The effects of racism are often masked under systems that seek to be overtly politically correct. This is why perpetrators of police brutality are being exonerated under the protection of the legal system. This is why police officers are often not held accountable for the violent executions of black youth. For some, failure to acknowledge race is presented as a potential solution to its challenges when, in reality, it is within this silence that racism is the most prolific. The articulations of the truths regarding these unjust realities are occurring on new platforms because of an awareness of the need to implement new tactics to address old problems. Hashtags have become the rhetorical tactic of choice, seeking to end this silence by transcending these binaries and becoming the unifying center around which conversations that result in change can occur.

In the end, past and current events continue to remind us of the reality that racism is a constant part of this nation's history. Retaliations to some of the countless injustices that confirm this fact have resulted in a revamped movement for cultural and historical awareness that seeks results in the forms of both public awareness and policy changes. This movement is both impassioned and intellectual, but documentation of the ideas and events that take place on either side now emerges on public platforms. Ultimately, the hashtag as a new genre is bridging the gap between public and private spaces and is a symbolic representation of the progress being made by communities that promote the convergence of texts, technologies, and literature on every level of the sociopolitical hierarchy. The hashtag has been the impetus of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement for this reason—a fact indicative of the magnetism of the hashtag. Accessibility to the contemporary texts that are emerging out of our culture and moving the national conversation on race in the direction of productive change therefore legitimize the efficacy of the hashtag as a new genre—a genre that we will continue to engage as we pursue that sense of social justice and equality forever steeped in the American dream.

Notes

[1] The unchecked ability to disseminate information on this issue does not come without its weaknesses. Because there is such a wealth of virtual space that allows for dialogue and the exchange of ideas, it is necessary to establish and reinforce legitimacy within the civil rights field now more than ever. The snowball effect of reposts and retweets can complicate damage control when it comes to the spread of misinformation. In this social media-driven culture, the due diligence of verification often goes undone because fictions can appear to be just as persuasive as facts. Buzzwords and phrases that are closely tied to pivotal moments and events can circulate into what is considered common knowledge without even being verified for accuracy. While the hashtag has come to embody the recontextualization of the civil rights struggle using contemporary methods of communication, it is important to be aware that it does not yet have the inherent ability to fact-check what comes after it, which leaves that responsibility up to the viewers and authors of this new genre.

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Citation Types

Type	Format
MLA Style	Kadiri, Deborah F. "Social Media Meets Social Justice: The Role of the Hashtag in the Contemporary Conversation on Race." *Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations*, edited by Editors of Salem Press, Salem, 2017. *Salem Online*.
APA Style	Kadiri, Deborah F. (2017). Social Media Meets Social Justice: The Role of the Hashtag in the Contemporary Conversation on Race. In E. Salem Press (Ed.), *Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations*. Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from https://online.salempress.com
CHICAGO Style	Kadiri, Deborah F. "Social Media Meets Social Justice: The Role of the Hashtag in the Contemporary Conversation on Race." *Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations*. Hackensack: Salem, 2017. Accessed January 10, 2019. https://online.salempress.com.