

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