

# The significance of fourth-wave feminism in millennial culture



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### **Abstract**

On 28th April 2018, Michelle Wolf hosted the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner, an event championing the right to freedom of speech. Jokes were made at expense of the sitting administration, in particular, about the lack of facts often presented by Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. The internet erupted into controversy, with many calling out Wolf on her blatant attack on a woman in power and calling her remarks "unfeminist". Wolf responded in an interview with "-because I'm a woman, I can say things about women because I know what it's like to be a woman, if that makes any sense." Across the country, Stacey Abrams was attempting to be the first African American woman to elected Governor of Georgia. However, despite her landmark campaign, there was increasing support for her opponent, Stacey Abrams, the less qualified of the two. Abrams was also white, a fact not missed by the Democratic voters on social media.

Unsurprisingly, criticism of Abrams' lack of experience was hailed as an attack on a woman by one of her own. Yet the running theme in these encounters and in the scholarship to date, is the unquestioned dominance of white women as both the creators and defenders of a feminism – not just in the second wave but today, in the digital era. Since they have by racial and social bias, more opportunity, greater resources' and a wider outreach they set the national narrative. Which begs the question: why does this resurgence of feminism seem increasingly hostile to women of color?

Additionally, does this current wave with its undertones of classism and ableism fall in line with the very definition of feminism which champions

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equality above all. Since these disparities are tied to social and racial frameworks, in this paper, I will explore the part of white feminism in the current social and political framework and discuss how millennials, women in particular, respond to it.

The public outcry against Wolf was eerily similar to a controversy from the summer of 2013, blogger Mikki Kendall grew increasingly frustrated watching her friends-who, like her, were - being viciously attacked online. They were being called names, bullied, and threatened by a white male academic who identified as a " male feminist". He later admitted that he had intentionally " trashed" women of color, posting on Twitter: " I was awful to you because you were in the way" (Kendall, 2013). However, the most noticeable thing about the public showdown, it was the lack of support given by prominent, mostly white digital feminists which prompted Kendall to start the hashtag. The failure to acknowledge the racist, sexist behavior of one their own frequent contributors prompted her to create #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen. Kendall's form of cyberfeminist activism in creating the hashtag quickly began trending on Twitter and ignited a wide range of discussions about social media, feminism and call--out culture. She was called out by multiple journalists such as Michelle Goldberg, who excoriated Kendall specifically, and women of color more generally, for starting a " toxic Twitter war" that is destructive for feminism (Goldberg, 2014).

What remain unquestioned by these journalists and scholarship in genral is the running theme in of the unquestioned dominance of white women as both the creators and defenders of a feminism - not just in the second wave but today, in the digital era. Since they have by racial and soial bias, more <https://assignbuster.com/the-significance-of-fourth-wave-feminism-in-millennial-culture/>

opportunity, greater resources and a wider outreach they set the national narrative. Although a number of scholars have critiqued the first or second waves of feminist movements as rooted in whiteness (Hull, Scott,

Smith, 1982; Truth, 2009; Ware, 1992), there is little existing literature that dissects whiteness and privilege in contemporary digital feminist activism. To address this gap in our understanding of white feminism, I will discuss some major arcs in modern feminism.

### **Literature review**

As a child of the 90s, I never knew a world without some version of the Internet, but it is said that during the early days of the Net, some scholars theorized that this emergence of virtual environments and a culture of fantasy would mean an escape the boundaries of race and the experience of racism. A few imagined that people would go online to escape their embodied racial and gender identities (Nakamura, 2002; ) and some saw this as a perfectly balanced platform where there is “ no race, no gender” much like aboard a Star Trek spaceship. The reality unsurprisingly, is quite different. Race and racism were ingrained biases, that transferred almost seamlessly, when ideas were shifted online. The reality of the Internet we have today has important implications for understanding whiteness and the privilege it affords when talking about feminism.

The examination of whiteness in the scholarly literature is, by now, well established (Twine and Gallagher, 2008). Whiteness, like other racial categories, is socially constructed and actively maintained through social boundaries. A key strategy in maintaining these boundaries is through efforts

to define who is, and is not, white, with ample historical evidenceshowing how the boundaries of whiteness are malleable across time, place and social context (Roediger, 2007). Being white is seen as the default and does not take away from any identity unlike others which are racialized. At the same time, some scholars have noted that whiteness can result in paradoxical ‘hypervisibility’ (Reddy, 1998). We have seen, historically, that whiteness can shape housing (Low, 2009), education (Leonardo, 2009), politics (Painter, 2010), law (Painter, 2010), social science research method and indeed, frames much of our (mis)understanding of U. S. Yet, whiteness is not often the focus of critical attention when it comes to discussions of the Internet and race (a notable exception to this is MacPherson, 2003), and to date, there is scant research on whiteness and women online (Daniels, 2009).

### **Dicussion**

The internet was supposed to be a free and open space, to encourage thought and conversation that would be impossible in daily life. However, feminism is a charged topic and when it is equated with race the conversation often turns hostile. For women of color, the initial challenge is simply being heard, as they are frequently ignored. Once their voices have registered, they risk being bullied and verbally abused (or worse). Most likely they will be called “angry”, or in some cases, accused of starting a “war” (Goldberg, 2014). These misreadings of critique as attack cause white women to further retreat from engaging about race and may even lead them to excluding women of color from feminist organizing in order to avoid even the possibility of criticism. For white women speaking out about white feminism is to risk losing connection with white women – and the

opportunities that come with that -- and hurt feelings because it is equal to speaking against a social order.

When Mikki Kendall's hashtag #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen was trending, many white feminists reporting feeling hurt, attacked, wounded, or simply left out of the conversation (Van Deven, 2013). In many ways, the reaction to challenges to white feminism causes "unhappiness" which, as Sara Ahmed explains, can be a good thing: "To be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order, a happiness order is to be willing to cause unhappiness, even if unhappiness is not your cause. To be willing to cause unhappiness might be about how we live an individual life (not to choose "the right path" is readable as giving up the happiness that is presumed to follow that path). To be willing to cause unhappiness can also be how we immerse ourselves in collective struggle, as we work with and through others who share our points of alienation. Those who are unseated by the tables of happiness can find each other." (Ahmed, 2010)

Ahmed's is a hopeful analysis for those who seek to find their niche in this new brand of feminism, and it is obviously effective and noticeable, when it comes to making change. Stacey Abrams won the Democratic primary. As Vox's Matthew Yglesias explained, black voters are what rushed Abrams towards making history. He said: "While black women are a crucial voting bloc capable of deciding close contests, they are sorely underrepresented in seats of political power." (Yglesias, 2018). A 2016 study by the Voter Participation Center, noted the increase in women voting when comparing 2012 and 2016. However, they predicted that the participation by groups of color, women in particular, will go down in the 2018 Midterms. They were <https://assignbuster.com/the-significance-of-fourth-wave-feminism-in-millennial-culture/>

wrong. Spurred on by the current political climate and encouraged by major political parties women of color, many of them under the age of thirty, have ran and won Midterm primaries and they are supported by their own. First time candidates such as Stacey Abrams , Peggy Flanagan, Deb Haaland and Rashida Tlaib are running in both red and blue states and many polls see them winning seats in the House and Congress this fall. Millenials are beginning to see the need to support and elect diverse voices and change the narrative.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is obvious that feminism or that the women that champion it are far from perfect. This is a global movement, with rules that shift and grow in response to criticism. However, to assume that feminism operates in a vacuum, distanced from historical oppression and cultural narrative would be a mistake Challenging white feminism in favor of an intersectional feminism that centers the experiences of black, Latina, Asian, Indigenous, queer, disabled, and trans women, is to speak against a social order. To challenge white feminism is also to risk causing unhappiness, but this is a risk we must take so that we can find each other in our resistance to it.

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