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In Defense of Hashtag Activism

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The Final Word:
In Defense of Hashtag Activism

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Abstract

This Final Word is an adapted rewriting of In Defense of Hashtag Activism published in April 2016 at http://reappropriate.co/2016/04/in-defense-of-hashtag-activism/

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My copy of *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Takaki, 2012) – a landmark history of early Asian American immigration – enjoys a position of prominence on my bookshelf. Although the book offers a detailed account of my own people's lived experiences, I was unaware of the knowledge contained within until I was assigned the text in an Asian American Studies class in my sophomore year of college.

My reading of *Strangers* was a transformative experience. Notes are scrawled throughout the book, but none are quite so meaningful as the message written to me by the book's author, the late Professor Ron Takaki, on the first page: "Remember your history, [for] all memory is political."

I've spent a lot of time thinking about the myriad questions embedded within this deceptively simple quote. How does the remembrance of history shape one's contemporary identity and politics? Is it possible to understand one's place within the present without preserving memories of past injustices? Is it possible for one to change an unjust system without first understanding oneself?

I find myself in agreement with Professor Takaki. Memory is, indeed, political, and I believe it to be required for any movement that seeks social change. Digital anti-racism activists of the last decade recognize this essential relationship between memory and politics, and have leveraged social media to create an activist tool popularly referred to as "hashtag activism." This tool engages marginalized people, particularly people of color, with a new form of digital activism that powerfully mixes the teaching of history with self-expressive acts of political resistance. Hashtag activism has, in essence, revolutionized the fight for social change.

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Anti-racism organizers often focus on building social movements through recruitment of individuals into disruptive collective actions such as letter writing, petition signing, and protest marching. Yet, Grace Lee Boggs, a radical thinker and social justice leader whose lifetime of work spanned more than half a century, suggested that these acts, alone, are insufficient to serve as the basis for an impactful social movement. Instead, Boggs (2012) suggests that radical evolution of self is needed to transform individual acts of rebellion into an anti-oppression revolution. Boggs notes,

> A rebellion is important, because it throws into question the legitimacy and supposed permanence of existing institutions. A revolution, however, requires that a people go beyond struggling against oppressive institutions and make [an] evolutionary / revolutionary leap towards becoming more self-conscious, more self-critical, more socially responsible human beings. In order to transform the world, we / they must transform our / themselves. (Allied Media Projects, 2015, para. 9)

Boggs challenges us to think more deeply about the work of sparking revolution. It is not enough, Boggs warns, to agitate against the shackles of the body or to unshackle the mind and soul; both must occur concurrently in order to spark revolution. Yet, rarely is the pursuit of self-transformation prioritized, and conventional spaces lack the resources to support such radical learning.

* * *

The internet is scarcely three decades old, and yet it has become an essential facet of modern existence. Technofuturist writers describe the progressive cyberization of the modern person whose identity now seamlessly bridges the divide between online and offline worlds ("Are We Becoming Cyborgs?," 2012; van Dijck, 2013). While some might predict that the disentanglement of identity from physical

self will usher in a post-racial utopia, in reality the internet is a place where race continues to wield deep significance. Although demographers predict it will take 25 years before people of color are the (combined) numerical majority in America (Lopez, 2013), the internet is already a so-called "majority-minority" space. People of color boast the highest rates of smartphone ownership (87% of Asian, 83% of Black, 82% of Hispanic and 76% of Native people compared to 74% of White people; Nielsen, 2015) and digital media consumption (Nielsen, 2013). People of color are the internet's earliest adopters, and digital spaces have become their primary gathering place.

More than a collection of kitten videos and Snapchat memes, the internet is also a political space. Specifically, the internet empowers traditionally excluded people with the tools to create their own spaces for self-expression, movement-building, and grassroots-organizing. For young people, particularly young people of color, the promise of digital technology for social justice work proves irresistible.

The internet's earliest digital activists were college students of color. In 2002 – long before Twitter and Facebook introduced the phrase "hashtag" to the popular lexicon -- Asian American college activists used early social media platforms like AsianAvenue.com, BB-Code forum boards like YellowWorld.org, and jury-rigged email listservs to stage coordinated protests of Abercrombie & Fitch clothiers for their sale of stereotype-laden anti-Asian t-shirts (Strasburg, 2012). Abercrombie & Fitch's subsequent decision to halt sales of the shirts would be one of the nation's earliest examples of an internet-based campaign facilitating a movement goal in offline spaces.

The introduction of Twitter hashtags was a watershed moment for online activism. By repurposing the hashtag (conceived by its developers as a tool for interpersonal communication) as a vehicle for disruptive acts of political resistance, hashtag activists offered a new idea: that the sharing of ideas in digital spaces might itself be a form of radical resistance. Hashtag activism proposes the pursuit of countercultural learning / teaching as a rebellious act, and in so doing promises Bogg's (2012) evolutionary / revolutionary leap.

Hashtag activism has been particularly influential for activism in the higher education setting. The anemic representation of students of color in institutions of higher education has angered student activists for over a century, yet their calls for improved on-campus conditions – whether with regard to improved ethnic studies, culturally targeted community resources, or more abundant mental health programs -- have often been stymied by the relative power imbalances afforded to students in general, and racially underrepresented students in particular. Presumptions of student passivity or apathy, as well as the siloing of student efforts within their individual campuses, often frustrate student-led advocacy efforts. Too often, administrators can afford to ignore the demands of student activists, and little gets done.

Twitter upended this status quo. In 2015, Black students at the University of Missouri were motivated by an incident of on-campus racism to create the #ConcernedStudent1950 hashtag to highlight their experiences of racial microaggressions and macroaggressions on their campus. The #ConcernedStudent1950 digital campaign quickly became a flashpoint for college students nationwide who likened the racial atmosphere of University of Missouri to their own campus climate. Within weeks of the #ConcernedStudent1950 hashtag launch, racist incidents at Yale University, Ithaca College, and Brandeis University sparked similar protests culminating in a Twitter-wide conversation on campus racism that transcended the geographic distance of each of the involved campuses. No longer

were student anti-racism activists toiling in relative obscurity against the injustices of their local campus. Through a single hashtag, individual student groups were able to unite against the broader specter of on-campus racism to create a movement with national impact.

The phrasing of the hashtag is itself noteworthy: 1950 was the year that Black students were first admitted to the University of Missouri. In choosing this hashtag, University of Missouri students established an immediate connection between the history of students of color at the University of Missouri and their contemporary lived experiences. One reason for highlighting this historic year was to underscore how five decades after integration, mainstream institutions of higher education remain culturally and politically inaccessible to people of color. Black, Latino, Southeast Asian American, Pacific Islander and Native people are profoundly underrepresented in the college classroom (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), either as teacher or student. For those students of color who enroll, they find a campus hostile to their presence and a classroom where their histories are rarely taught.

Hashtag movements empower student activists of color to challenge their own on-campus invisibility. Through the creation of a viral hashtag, students of color subvert the power dynamics of the conventional classroom by asserting a curriculum of their own choosing. Examples abound of Twitter users of color – particularly students of color – rejecting the limitations of their classrooms with hashtag-based conversations that enable the dissemination of countercurrent radical history and knowledge. In the wake of protests in Ferguson, MO in 2014, for example, several crowdsourced syllabi of recommended reading materials relating to police brutality, racial profiling, Blackness, and the mass incarceration state were shared through the

#FergusonSyllabus hashtag. At the University of Missouri, the #ConcernedStudent1950 hashtag doubled as a digital classroom where the traditional roles of student and teacher were reversed as students used the digital medium to teach about their own lived experiences at the school.

Twitter is often mischaracterized by its most unfair critics as a frivolous pastime pejoratively labeled as collective whining over unimportant issues vocalized by a sea of coddled youth, incapable of exerting concrete change in the offline world. Critics of hashtag activism suggest that the neoliberal nature of one's online presence precludes effective social justice work. These critics suggest that social media's flattening of personal identity into a consumer commodity traded in the currency of likes and retweets complicates the implicitly selfless pursuit of social justice movement goals.

Examples like #ConcernedStudent1950 and #BlackLivesMatter offer compelling counterargument to these critics. Launched by Twitter users Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, #BlackLivesMatter was created in 2013 in response to the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his killer George Zimmerman. It has since evolved into a sweeping civil rights movement that has galvanized thousands of anti-racist activists to agitate against police militarization and state-sanctioned devaluing of the Black body – a persistent issue of deep significance to the nation's Black community that received scant attention prior to the hashtag's invention. To date, #BlackLivesMatter has sparked a landslide of community organizing efforts, launched a Congressional campaign[1], and been referenced by a sitting president of the United States[2].

#ConcernedStudent1950 activists focused the "noise" of its digital conversation by deploying the hashtag alongside more traditional

acts of disruption; combined, these tactics accomplished profound change. While Twitter users posted thousands of messages to the hashtag, students organized boycotts and hunger strikes to translate that groundswell of online support to offline spaces. By November 2015, the efforts of #ConcernedStudent1950 activists had resulted in the resignation of University of Missouri president Timothy Wolfe and chancellor R. Bowen Loftin. More importantly, hashtags like #ConcernedStudent1950 and #BlackLivesMatter sparked a national conversation on race, racism, and anti-blackness.

Twitter's relevance to higher education is not limited to the interests of student activists. Twitter gives voice to all that the academy renders voiceless, whether inconvenient ideas and/or inconvenient people. In 2014, tenured Virginia Tech professor of English Steven Salaita was in the final stages of negotiating a new position at the University of Illinois when he used Twitter to vocalize his opinion critical of Israel's (mis)treatment of Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip. When University of Illinois chancellor Phyllis Wise worked to revoke the school's employment offer to Salaita in the days following his online remarks[3], Twitter became a vehicle for a national outcry against the university's unjust decision. In combination with organized boycotts of the university, Twitter users successfully won the resignation of Chancellor Wise and facilitated a lawsuit filed by Salaita against the school for damages.

Institutions of higher education are often prized as bastions of free speech, yet too often even in these spaces certain speech is inaccessible, or deemed unacceptable. Social media is built upon the same principles of free expression as the academy, and there are no people more in need of dedicated spaces for self-expression than those who have consistently found their voices silenced and their histories erased by mainstream spaces of higher learning.

Long thrust into the margins of the mainstream, people of color have constructed out of the digital realm an alternative neighborhood of classrooms, theatres, and support groups where people of color are nurtured, not ignored. Twitter and related platforms serve as a space for people of color to engage traditionally unheard and underserved voices, to preserve and share the politics of our collective memory, to amplify radical acts of self-expression, to build cross-community coalitions, and to foment a better socially-conscious alt-discourse; all are necessary to spark the self-transformation of Grace Lee Boggs' imagining.

The revolution itself will not solely be tweeted. Radical change to America's systems of oppression cannot be accomplished solely via tools developed by, reliant on, and profitable to corporate America. But, that does not mean that social media has no place within the toolkit of the discerning social justice activist.

Revolutionary / evolutionary change must start somewhere. Everyone's journey towards self-transformation is unique. For many, it is likely to begin with a hashtag.

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[1] Missouri State Senator and vocal #BlackLivesMatter activist Sen. Maria Chappelle-Nadal announced her campaign for the US House of Representatives in 2015. She is one of several candidates receiving support from #BlackVotesMatter, an offshoot campaign of #BlackLivesMatter to address political underrepresentation of the Black community.
[2] President Barack Obama mentioned #BlackLivesMatter by name at a town hall event in April 2016, but was critical of activists whom he described as unwilling to compromise.
[3] Following Salaita's tweets, Wise issued an open letter explaining a recommendation made by her and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Vice President to the school's Board of Trustees to not pursue his appointment. Since deleted by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's website, the letter's text is still available online through blog repostings (e.g. Academe Blog, retrieved July 1, 2016 https://academeblog. org/2014/08/22/chancellor-phyllis-wise-explains-the-firing-of-steven-salaita/). In the letter, Wise defends the University's revoking of Salaita's appointment offer by saying: "What we cannot and will not tolerate at the University of Illinois are personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them." The University's Board of Trustees subsequently issued a letter supporting Wise's position.

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