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## Embodying Public Feminisms: Collaborative Intersectional Models for Engagement

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## Research Article

# Embodying Public Feminisms: Collaborative Intersectional Models for Engagement

—TEMPTAOUS MCKOY , CECILIA D. SHELTON , CARLEIGH DAVIS , AND ERIN A. FROST 

**Abstract—Introduction:** This article offers an approach that we call **critical collaboration**—an array of theoretical commitments drawn from the authors’ embodiments and lived experiences. In making explicit the connections between authorial embodiment and the content of theory and practice, our practical models demonstrate new and varied approaches to public feminisms. We begin with a discussion of embodiment and then offer four sections—amplification rhetorics, apparent feminisms, a *techné* of marginality, and memetic rhetorical environments—with key takeaways to guide readers through our related-but-different approaches. Our goal in doing so is to underscore the importance of public feminisms to enacting social justice in technical and professional communication. This means recognizing our obligation to respond to unjust technical communication. Technical communication is not a utopia of inclusion and anti-racism—although some corners of the field are dedicated to those topics, to be sure. Rather, despite the social justice turn, some parts of the field still insist on objectivity, neutrality, and practicality as the touchstones for “good” technical communication. Our work here shows some of the ways in which we might resist the cultural blinders that allow such ideas to persist unabated. Drawing especially on research in rhetoric and embodiment studies, we build interdisciplinary bridges with critical race studies (including critical race feminisms), womanism, gender studies, technical communication, Black rhetorics, queer studies, cultural studies, and rhetorical genre studies, among other fields, to provide a set of practical approaches to public feminist exigencies that resist collapsing all feminisms into a single approach. We argue that drawing on embodiment to develop a multiplicity of feminist approaches and engaging in critical collaboration as those approaches evolve is a way forward that allows for more stakeholders to engage fruitfully in public feminist projects. Our hope is that readers can then imagine public feminisms as one avenue for doing the social justice work that is vital to the growth of technical and professional communication as a field.

**Index Terms**—Critical collaboration, embodiment, public feminism.

It is widely accepted that many public institutions are built and maintained by logics of whiteness and patriarchy [1]–[3] that are often reinforced by the technical communication practices that support these institutions. Montoya et al. [4] explicate the complicated nature of unraveling oppression further in arguing that whiteness, patriarchy, and capitalism are inextricable. In resisting, then, we need to engage equally complex and diverse strategies. In this article, we contribute to a critical interrogation of public institutions by assessing the patterns of technical communication that support

the status quo; we make this contribution by finding ways to bridge disciplinary pieces of knowledge with lived pieces of knowledge and by suggesting multiple ways—not a single dominant way—of doing so.

In addition to “unraveling oppression,” we are obligated to construct something new in its place rather than create a vacuum. To be clear, these new structures and practices will not be streamlined, smooth, or frictionless. We need friction. We need knots and tangles and kinks, conflicts and conversations, as well as new relationships and ideas and infrastructures. We aim for constructive solutions alongside unraveling; we support amplification of marginalized perspectives to both unravel the status quo and produce the new kinks and nodes and frictions that we need to move forward.

We term this work as *critical collaboration*: Collaboration occurring without the need to flatten our different approaches into one. To explain, our embodied experiences delineate the possibilities and motivations for our engagement. By expanding those embodied experiences through attention to

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## Practitioner Takeaway

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- Critical collaboration is collaboration that welcomes parallel approaches and eschews the need to flatten different approaches into one.
  - Critical collaboration and embodied feminist approaches allow us to focus on the kinks, knots, tangles, and tears that can generate coalition building for social justice work.
  - The need to trouble notions of objectivity and neutrality in technical communication is urgent, and collaborative intersectional models like the one described in this article can aid in that work.
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intersectionality [5] and each other's realities, we can likewise expand what is possible to recognize as a path forward. We take feminisms as a focal point because of their attention to collaboration [6]–[9] and embodiment [10]–[12]. Although collaboration and attention to an embodiment are not typically top institutional priorities, we see them as essential to productive social justice interventions into institutional technical rhetorics, a concept that helps us think about communicating with and in public about specialized information [13]. We use them as a jumping-off point to join the existing conversation about social justice within technical communication literature [14]–[24].

This article uses rhetorical listening [25] and critical collaboration together to get at the complex dynamics of intersectionality and its impact on public intellectualism—and on our daily lives. We take up a multifaceted discussion of embodied public feminisms as avenues for social justice. Specifically, we offer amplification rhetorics (ARs), apparent feminisms, techné of marginality, and memetic rhetorical environments as a set of sometimes-complementary approaches for thinking practically about public intellectualism and social justice. In keeping with our argument that drawing on a diversity of perspectives yields work that works for more people, these theoretical commitments are drawn from a wide variety of scholarly work across multiple disciplines. For example, ARs pull from work in technical communication and rhetoric [19], [26], [27]; critical race scholarship [28]; womanist theory [29], [30]; and Black rhetorics [31]–[34]. Apparent feminism draws on indigenous [35], queer [36], and cultural studies work [37], [38]; as well as anthropology [39]. Techné of marginality builds on Black feminism [11]; rhetorical genre studies [40], [41]; systems theory [42]; and theories of social capital [43]. The memetic rhetorical theory (MRT) uses meme theory [44] as a foundation and rhetorical and technical communication theory to increase public relevancy.

We position this article as an extended meditation on the importance of feminist embodiment of

“placing the experiences and expertise of [those doing feminist work] at the center of the analysis” [45]. In offering four different perspectives on the urgency of public feminisms, we highlight the ways in which embodiment affects (but does not determine) what is legible to each of us as urgent or important. Drawing especially on rhetoric and embodiment studies for its foundation, this article purposefully models the concepts it argues for. We do not seek to present a unified approach to feminist concerns but rather to demonstrate what a set of sometimes complementary approaches might look like. The four models we present here are the results of years of collaboration and conversation put into practice by people with shared goals but different embodied experiences. We seek to provide an example of how sincere engagement between and among feminists of varying embodiments can strengthen public enactments of feminism toward intersectional social justice.

## EMBODIMENT

Embodiment is a critical concept for understanding this approach. Embodiment, for us, is the complex interaction of several layers: tangible bodily characteristics, their perception, and the histories of lived experience that mediate all action. When we invoke embodiment, we draw on the work of critical race feminists and feminist technoscience scholars. Haraway [12] argues for no clear boundary between the constructed and the natural, the mind, and the body. Harding's [10] “strong objectivity” and Collins' [11] standpoint theory approach to Black feminist thought suggest that those who benefit most from patriarchy—White men—are actually the least well-positioned to do meaningful research since they have so long been inculcated into a culture of taking on the position of—and actually believing that they are—neutral researchers. They too often lose the connection between “What one does and how one thinks” [11, p. 748]. Rather, those operating from marginalized perspectives—women, people of color, people living with disabilities, trans- and nonbinary individuals—are more likely to view the world from critical,

useful perspectives because they have constantly been made aware of their own “otherness.”

As Shelton [46, p. 19] says,

If we have any hope of challenging institutionalized bias—racism, patriarchy, ableism, and others—then we must resist the perverted use of rhetorical tools to reproduce and normalize oppression and injustice.

This means refusing to center whiteness, maleness, and other privileged identity markers. Drawing and expanding on strong objectivity—including the notion that researcher reflexivity is paramount for rigor—allows us to suggest that a multiplicity of perspectives can then result in more meaningful research.

Critical race theorists and especially critical race feminists have further argued that feminist approaches alone—as they have historically been carried out—are insufficient to meet the needs of people and especially women of color [47]–[49]. Because of these insufficiencies, our approach utilizes theories of embodiment in combination with tenets of critical race feminism to better account for more lived realities. However, we acknowledge that no one can ever account for all experiences. Practices of critical race feminists include counter-storytelling [3], a method that we take up here with our approach of offering embodied theoretical approaches. After all, theoretical approaches are really stories about how the world works [50]. By emphasizing connections between authorial embodiment through counter-storytelling and the content of theory and practice, our feminist work here pokes at cracks in the facade of “neutral” and “objective” technical communication models.

We do not seek to shift which conversations dominate the center because we do not want to recognize a center, and we are advocating a radical (if incrementally accomplished) change rather than a retrofit of current systems. We want to shift the idea that feminisms and social justice agendas must operate from a center at all [51]. At the same time, we recognize that it is impossible to entirely do away with a “center” of knowledge, and we discuss our own positionalities as a way to combat this.

To further contextualize, Enos and Morton’s [52] findings show that many understand universities (which we might think of as sorts of “centers”) as spaces that solve problems that reside in

communities. We seek to turn this logic on its head, suggesting that communities are places for solutions, particularly if those solutions can be formulated and enacted through coalition-building across academic and nonacademic spaces. We, the four coauthors of this article, operate from the institution of the university, and we seek solutions beyond the university center.

Verjee [3, p. 57] claims not only that

universities are premised on an ideology of whiteness, patriarchy, and classism, ... which functions to colonize, marginalize, and silence racialized students, non-academic staff, and faculty

but also that universities are

a site of struggle between dominant knowledges (e.g., the mainstream knowledge of professional scholars) and the wisdoms of “othered” world views (e.g., the lived knowledge within communities).

By situating ourselves as we do, we aim to take advantage of what ethos we have while resisting white heteropatriarchal institutional logics that flatten difference; we acknowledge multiple and varied communities with differing interests and needs as sources of conversation and solutions.

Therefore, our first step in thinking about public feminisms must always be prioritization. By beginning with the four particular contexts that we discuss here, we create specific ideas of what communities academics can address so that we can draw theory from those sites, and we hope to contribute to more productive conversations that might benefit those sites as well. The prevalence and urgency with which feminists have engaged community work in recent years evidence whole new threads—not just one, but many—of public feminist engagement. In this article, we work to help readers think practically about ways of becoming more responsible community intellectuals [53], who can draw on intersectional feminist ideals [54], [55] to interact with a diversity of audiences. In other words, we offer new ways of talking and thinking about public feminisms as technical communication and social justice praxis.

In the following sections, we present four models that draw on cultural and historical examples of feminist technical communication in action to show places where these practices achieve, fall

short of, and actively work against social justice goals. The knowledge that we derive from them demonstrates new approaches for engaging in public feminisms while modeling ethical and not neutral technical communication.

To be clear, we do not believe that neutral technical communication exists. Authors who claim that their texts are neutral are not only incorrect, but they are potentially doing damage to readers who may be persuaded that only one correct method for doing things exists. Technical communication is contextual. Much field scholarship has already asserted this [6], [19], [27], [50], [56]–[63]. We emphasize it here because it is nevertheless easy to slip into old ways of thinking about neutrality.

Our goal in doing this work is to underscore the usefulness of feminism in enacting social justice in technical and professional communication. This means first recognizing our obligation to respond to unjust technical communication. Our goal is to offer a mobile, permeable, intersectional, and embodied set of approaches for enacting and supporting feminisms in public spaces. These approaches exist and thrive in conversation with one another. Specifically, we seek to offer ideas for claiming discursive space, identifying counter-publics, and building coalitions across a diversity of identity-related categories, including but not limited to race, class, sexuality, age, and environment. We especially work to consider digital spaces, including social media, where feminisms both find support and face bitter hostility.

In offering our theoretical commitments, each one of us coauthors works through practical examples as a way of marrying theory to practice—indeed, as a way of letting practice drive theory. We begin—as feminist resistance so often does—with public spaces. We tell the stories of feminist practice in those public spaces and share our own theoretical engagements with those contexts. Our sites of inspiration and engagement include the rhetorical situation of feminists responding to this special issue, the social media watchdog movement related to Wendy Davis’s 2013 filibuster for reproductive rights, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the #MeToo Twitter movement. In amplifying and extending the feminist work happening in these contexts—indeed, in selecting these contexts—we are careful to acknowledge our own theoretical commitments as well as their limitations.

We strive to model attention to intersectionality, but we do not put forth our versions of feminist attentiveness to technical texts as perfect. Every

theoretical stance will come with gaps and imperfections. Rather, we model listening to each other and letting each other’s feminist influences and approaches impact and shape our own work in an iterative process. Our feminisms (and our approaches to social justice) exist in conversation “shaped by the continuous investment that marginalized communities put into sustaining each other” [19, p. 5]. This ongoing conversation is inclusive of conflict, inconsistencies, and other generative entanglements. As women and feminists lead the resistance to rising antifeminist forces emboldened by the increasingly frightening political climate in the West, we encourage feminists to engage in this sort of critical support.

To explain how this approach operates on a larger scale, we espouse many of the resistance movements that have recently coalesced—the Black Lives Matter movement, the Women’s Marches, the social media watchdog movement related to Wendy Davis’s 2013 filibuster for reproductive rights, and the #MeToo Twitter movement, among others—and even count ourselves among the activists involved. However, we argue vehemently that these spaces must remain open to critique and reflection. Feminists—through innovative uses of social media and massive public protests—have successfully demanded a public reckoning in recent years. However, the size of such movements dictates that contradictory dynamics will emerge from within and among the feminist resistance. In sum, we argue that intersectional feminists must work not just to ensure that intersectionality lies at feminisms’ core but to ensure that it permeates work in technical communication toward more diverse, inclusive, and thus useful texts.

Our commitment to making apparent and amplifying the embodied positions that inspire and limit our feminist engagements with technical texts requires that we also offer up some relevant details of our positionality. We listen and respond to each other’s feminist theoretical approaches within this article, yes, but we have been engaged in the iterative process of rhetorical listening and critical collaboration with each other for years. With those relationships as a background, then, we offer up this set of interlocking contexts and concerns about how new media enable intersectional feminist engagement with technical texts, creating new opportunities along with new risks, and how the publicness of this work has created existential challenges for some feminists. We offer a set of complementary new concepts for thinking about the 21st-century challenges for feminist technical communication work.

## AMPLIFICATION RHETORICS BY TEMPTAOUS MCKOY, A BLACK WOMAN

In aiming to become public intellectuals enacting feminist and womanist practices, it is important that self-identifying feminists and womanists recognize our positionality in our approaches. This is especially important in calls for papers and other technical and professional communication artifacts and documents that define the scopes and directions of our fields. In this section, we apply ARs as a lens for analyzing the important work that such technical documentation accomplishes.

ARs are discursive and communicative practices, both written/textual and embodied/performative, that are typically performed/used by individuals who self-identify as Black and center the lived experiences and epistemologies of Black people and other historically marginalized groups. ARs are drawn from technical communication practices—that is, communicative practices that are aimed at specific groups with particular sets of knowledge—and are characterized by the following three tenets:

- The reclamation of agency (ownership of embodied rhetorical practices)
- The accentuation and acknowledgement of narratives (validated lived experiences)
- The inclusion of marginalized epistemologies (that add to new ways of learning)

These tenets are drawn, respectively, from the primary concerns of critical race theory, womanist theory, and Black rhetorics. By employing ARs, feminists will be able to enact rhetorical discursive and performance practices that acknowledge (not shame) gaps in representation and call for more diverse public intellectuals. This section will focus on two specific spaces that feminists could look to in their efforts toward incorporating ARs within their practices for resistance and to support feminisms in public spaces.

Critical race theorists shine a light on how our embodiments impact how we move, not only in our day-to-day lives but also within our scholarship. Often, White male perspectives are automatically centered as the sole responsible party for dominating fields of scholarship as well as public interest [10], [11]. However, we also must unpack and reconsider the role that White women have played in dominating spaces of public interest and scholarship—often under the guise of feminism.

For example, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK), unbeknownst to many, played a role in the

Women's Suffrage Movement [64]. Their support for this movement was based on an argument for the inclusion of women in democratic processes that echoes many teachings and foundational principles of feminism. However, it is important to remember that the ideals of the WKKK were rooted in their opposition to, in their words, Jews, Catholics, Negroes, Socialists, and Radicals [64], and their demands for inclusion also extended to their own inclusion in the workings of the all-White male Klan based on this shared ideology. While working in opposition to the groups named in their ideology, the WKKK argued that they were beneficial to the Klan and so should not be made to serve an "Invisible Empire" [64]. In this way, foundational ideologies of feminism were used by the WKKK to promote their own inclusion in the democratic process while simultaneously working to oppress and exclude others.

The complex history of the WKKK is by no means unique among women's movements. Today, voting trends indicate that White women are committed to feminist goals only when those goals maintain (or fail to meaningfully challenge) racial status quos, as evidenced by the fact that more than half of White women voters cast their ballot for Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election [65]. This fact raises the following question: Is the common use of White men as a stand-in for patriarchal systems effective, and does it remove or absolve White women of their responsibility within the systems that they are fighting against? Historically, White women have had a role in the continued dismissal of other historically marginalized individuals, but they have also played a role in both rallying against and amplifying the voices of White men.

For example, White abortion rights activists ignored Black people's concerns about birth control and its effects [66]. A side effect of reproductive rights for White women is that people of color were and are far more likely to face sterilization abuse. Abortion rights allowed medical professionals, predominantly men, the space to justify forced sterilization for the welfare of "mentally deficient persons" [66, p. 22]. From 1964 to the time of Davis' publication in 1993, "statistics revealed approximately 65% of the women sterilized in North Carolina were Black and approximately 35% were White" [66, p. 22]. Although the abortion movement has had many positive impacts today, Milstein [67] notes that one of the key ways that White feminists continue to dominate spaces is through their lack of understanding of their impact. She suggests that good intentions can

mask the experiences of women of color who may be impacted differently than white women.

For White women interacting with women of color, we may reflexively, unwittingly assume our experiences—and therefore our intentions—are (or should be) primary. [67]

Feminists may have served as key voices of resistance to patriarchal systems—but at whose expense?

Although White males dominate the majority of scholarship and roles of public intellectuals, White women have managed to dominate these spaces closely behind White men. Drawing on ARs to reclaim agency, decenter dominant narratives, and empower marginalized ways of knowing, I argue that this rhetorical construction allows the implementation of the phrase “White men” within our scholarship and in places of public discourse to serve as a surrogate for institutionalized patriarchal systems, instead of forcing us to deal with the more complex notion that patriarchy happens as a result of male dominance but is perpetuated by all kinds of people.

In a corollary to Mohanty’s [37] antiessentialist argument, feminists must be careful how they identify agents of patriarchy. The notion that patriarchy exists only outside the boundaries of White women’s influence results in White feminism. Khansa [68] argues that this is not actually feminism at all but rather a further instantiation of White supremacy that includes empowerment for White women. White feminism celebrates the ratification of the 19th amendment without acknowledging that not all women gained the right to vote with its passage, the Fourth of July without acknowledging that Black people remained slaves, and the Emancipation Proclamation without remembering that Black people remained enslaved until June 19, 1865 (known today as Juneteenth) [69].

Even the call for papers for this special issue appears to subconsciously disengage from the experiences of non-White women by including only one question that specifically highlights “race, nation, religion, class, sexuality, and caste structure” and by focusing on “White men” as representative of patriarchy. As a Black woman reviewing the call, these problematic areas were immediately obvious to me, while I had to point them out to my White mentor. I do not say this to call out my mentor as being oblivious; rather, I mention this to say that we all have hidden biases

or “blind spots” [70]. I likely miss some issues that are concerning to White women. However, my feminist perspective differs significantly from that of a White woman in that I do not have the privilege to be identified as a woman first or only; rather, I identify at an intersection of marginalized experiences as a Black woman. White women can advocate for changes in systems of inequality from a place of privilege due to their ability to identify both inside and outside the system that they are seeking to change; as women, they are outside the system, but as White, they benefit from social inequality [71].

This returns us to the question of whether using “White men” to reference patriarchal systems is effective. I argue that this placeholder terminology absolves White women of their responsibility for and position within the systems that feminists seek to change. Further, calls for inclusion sometimes participate in this shifting of responsibility as well. Mikka Kendell [72] created the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen to call out the implicit and explicit bias found in mainstream White feminism. The hashtag erupted on Twitter and resulted in many think pieces in which women of color suggested ways to help White women become better allies. However, I argue that this work to provide instruction on how to be a better “ally” requires additional labor on the part of the person already impacted by the “racial bias and double standard for women of different races” [67, p. 1], instead of the labor being placed on the person who initiated the infraction.

I recall the tenets of ARs, then, to argue that White feminists must be able to engage with other scholars and public intellectuals who may or may not identify with feminist ideologies instead of talking *at* other public intellectuals, scholars, and community members whom they wish to represent. Feminists can resist essentialization and patriarchy together by reclaiming agency through embodied rhetorical practices, valuing lived experiences of all kinds of women and feminisms, and including marginalized ways of knowing. Feminists who are dedicated to moving from White feminism to more inclusive feminisms must look for ways to pass the mic to other scholars and public intellectuals, forging a space for other narratives to be included in the charge for resistance against institutionalized systems of patriarchy.

### Key Takeaways

1. The reclamation of agency, or taking ownership of embodied rhetorical practices, is an important first step for all feminists.

2. Feminists should work to acknowledge and honor their own and others' lived experiences.
3. Including marginalized epistemologies—those that are not already centered or taken as “unbiased”—are necessary for adding new ways of learning.

### APPARENT FEMINISMS BY ERIN A. FROST, A WHITE CIS WOMAN IN HER THIRTIES

On June 25, 2013, Texas Senator Wendy Davis attempted a filibuster to block Senate Bill 5, a proposal to tighten abortion regulations (including banning abortion after 20 weeks gestation). Although the bill (later law) itself constitutes legal technical communication and is interesting as an example of the continued and uneven political struggle over abortion rights in the US and abroad [73], [74], the role that social media played in the political debate surrounding this bill is even more fascinating for our purposes here. As a form of technical communication, social media allowed citizen watchdogs to force legislators to be accountable for actions that they thought had gone unobserved.

Davis's filibuster lasted about 11 hours, and she was ruled off-topic around 9:00 PM for reading about sonograms—this, even though many states, including Texas, had laws on the books requiring ultrasounds prior to abortion. In the time remaining until midnight (and the end of the legislative session), Senator Leticia R. San Miguel Van de Putte used parliamentary inquiries to extend the effect of Davis's filibuster. During those final hours, the number of people following the session on YouTube and Twitter swelled to more than 180,000. Because of a complete lack of coverage by major media networks, these social media were the only points of contact for those not physically present. Citizens used chat features to help one another understand the technical intricacies of the workings of the Senate and the cleverness of Senator Van de Putte's allyship practices.

Davis and Van de Putte's efforts were successful in that the bill was not passed before midnight. However, as I watched the YouTube livestream along with thousands of others in the minutes after midnight, a small knot of White male Republican senators huddled together. Soon, they announced that the bill had passed. Others in the chamber—and, unbeknownst to those who had cast illegal votes, the many social media

watchers—knew that the vote had happened after midnight and the official end of the legislative session. Nearly 200,000 people had just watched Texas Republicans circumvent democracy. Viewers on the YouTube channel were among the first to note that the vote took place after the midnight close of the legislative session. Had the YouTube and Twitter livestreams not occurred, that might well have been the end of the story. Instead, in the wee hours of June 26, Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst was forced to admit that the vote had taken place illegally and that the bill was dead.

In telling this story, I use an apparent feminist approach to examine the role that social media played in the case of Senate Bill 5 as a way of examining the feminist potential of social media as a technical communication tool for American citizens to engage in state and national politics. Apparent feminism asks its practitioners to make feminism apparent to seek nonfeminist-identified allies, and to critique rhetorics of efficiency. In doing so, this theoretical approach builds a foundation on feminist technical communication scholarship [57]–[62] and additionally draws on Indig [35]; queer [36]; cultural [37], [38]; and anthropological [39] work to further position the sociocultural importance of feminist perspectives on modern politics and the technical documents that guide political work.

I take an explicitly feminist stance on this matter in many ways, the most important of which is pointing out the following.

1. The bill that Davis filibustered would have had dire impacts for women in the state of Texas by limiting their access to safe abortion services.
2. Male senators displayed a significant amount of gendered ignorance (purposeful or not) in behaving as though sonograms are not related to abortion.
3. The ethic of efficiency that some senators relied upon to rationalize voting illegally was actually inefficient in terms of maintaining democratic ideals.
4. The imagery of Davis's pink tennis shoes as exemplifying resistance to the bill leaves out many stakeholders.

The bill was ultimately passed in a special legislative session in July 2013. In 2016, the US Supreme Court rendered parts of the law unconstitutional through *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt* [75], although not before more than half of the clinics that provided access to safe, legal abortion in Texas were forced to shut their doors



[76]. Meanwhile, Texas already required fetal ultrasounds for nondiagnostic purposes prior to abortion [77], meaning that Texas senators were fully aware that Davis was not off-topic in her filibuster when she was called out of order. Texas Senators were also aware that votes must be taken before the end of a legislative session to be legal.

For most feminists, the points made in the paragraph above are obvious. My fourth point, however, may be less obvious to White feminists in particular and was less obvious to me until I began to more carefully consider perspectives other than my own, often through the eyes of the graduate students whom I have been lucky to work with (some of whom are coauthors of this article). Although major media sources today tend to tell the story of Davis's filibuster and focus on the symbolism of her pink tennis shoes as emblematic of (White) feminism—pink being a familiar symbol for the preservation of a particular, docile kind of womanhood that has been critiqued by Barbara Ehrenreich [78] in her well-known feminist critique of the “cult of pink kitsch”—it was Van de Putte, a Tejana woman, who was the center of attention and the source of feminist political and technical power in the critical hours leading up to the end of the legislative session.

Counter-storytelling reminds us that Van de Putte was at center stage during the hours when social media watchers peaked; these were the hours during which interactions about the Texas Senate's uptake of Bill 5 as streamed on YouTube and Twitter as a set of rhetorical artifacts can help readers draw conclusions about the role of social media in politics. Van de Putte demonstrated feminist solidarity by picking up the spirit of Davis's filibuster and engaging in her own parliamentary-style filibuster. The moment that most echoed through social media users' feeds on the evening of June 25 was from Van de Putte, pointedly asking Presiding Officer Robert Duncan, who had repeatedly ignored her, how a female senator could be recognized to speak. Contrary to the direction of social media conversations in those critical hours, Van de Putte is not usually acknowledged as the hero of this story.

Apparency was an important aspect of forcing Texas Republicans to admit that their “efficient” vote was illegal. Once lawmakers were made aware of the many “silent” social media watchers, they could no longer sustain the fiction of a legal vote. Journalists refer to this sort of apparency as “sunshine”; sunshine laws are open-records laws

(following the federal Freedom of Information Act) requiring public access to the workings of government. From this notion arises the central tenet of apparent feminism: apparency, or the notion that those operating in the public interest (although unable to achieve full transparency, which, like neutrality, operates as an ideal but not reality) should strive to make their biases known.

Likewise, nonfeminist allies were important in the events of the Senate Bill 5 filibuster. Thousands of watchers on YouTube decried the unfair practices of Texas Republicans; not all these watchdogs were feminists. Hailing allies who may not identify as feminists but who do value fairness and justice are critical for public feminisms. Finally, dismantling rhetorics of efficiency—rhetorics in which patriarchal structures make up the rules as they go because they assume no one is watching or can understand—is integral to public feminisms. If we are truly invested in democracy, we have an obligation to communicate the technical workings of democracy in a way that is understandable to the public. This sort of transparency goes hand-in-hand with feminist ideals of openness/apparency, collaboration, and equity.

### Key Takeaways

1. Hero narratives are efficient; apparent feminisms can help us see past an efficient narrative to the people who have done the work (such as Senator Van de Putte).
2. Apparency (as an achievable corollary to transparency), collaboration in achieving a widespread understanding of technical terms, and devotion to equity are necessary for social justice.
3. Social media are tools that social justice-oriented technical communicators must take up to combat patriarchal efficiency.

### TECHNÉ OF MARGINALITY BY CECILIA D. SHELTON, A BLACK CIS WOMAN IN HER LATE THIRTIES

The rhetorical work of activists is becoming more well-established as a kind of technical communication [51]. But because our disciplinary definitions and connotations still narrowly limit who and what comes to mind when we think of communicating with and about expert knowledge, we have not spent enough time connecting the lived and embodied experiences of communicators to the methods that they use to communicate. In this contemporary moment, Black feminist activism is providing incisive leadership in solving social

problems and prompting action by everyone from everyday citizens to politicians. Not only should Black feminist activism be recognized as technical communication, but technical communication must also be transformed by Black feminism. A *techné* of marginality is a methodology that foregrounds the values of Black feminist knowledge production, which include lived experience as evidence, an ethic of care, collaboration, and attention to embodiment, among other qualities [11]. The framework invites technical communication scholars to see expertise derived from lived experience and communicated with cultural rhetorical practices.

I use a *techné* of marginality here to contextualize a genre analysis of the hashtags used in #BlackLivesMatter Twitter activism. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was coined by three Black, queer women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—and evolved into a global network of activism, contributing to the broader Movement for Black Lives. A Black feminist reading of their work characterizes their expert knowledge of oppressive systems and their strategic organization of everyday people in resistance to that oppression as technical communication. But perhaps more important, a Black feminist reading of their work asks us to pay attention to what might otherwise be overlooked: the relationship between what and how they know and what and how they communicate. In particular, the Black feminist sensibilities animating #BlackLivesMatter also inspire an innovative generic approach to hashtags that merits attention.

Like other examples of protest, appeals for the value of Black lives operate in a particularly liminal rhetorical space—needing, at once, to align itself with traditionally accepted rhetorical practices to be heard, but also to break with tradition and take up alternate rhetorical strategies that signal dissent from dominant discourses. If #BlackLivesMatter and protest rhetorics, in general, must achieve a kind of rhetorical in-between-ness to be persuasive, then standardized commitments to rhetorical norms must be disrupted. Protest rhetorics require already marginalized discourse communities to adhere to *and* flout conventions, to be recognizable and markedly distinct, all at the same time. Attention to genres of communication common to contemporary activism (or what I call protest genres here) can illustrate how rhetors navigate this complex rhetorical situation while also being effective at moving the public to various kinds of action—a critical marker of technical communication.

Tardy uses the term *innovation* to describe

departures from genre convention that are perceived as effective and successful by the text's intended audience or community of practice. [41, p. 342]

Tardy's definition explicitly favors a positive connotation to innovation that is based on perception. She contrasts *innovation* with *deviance*, which is typically perceived negatively. In a public context marked by gender, race, class, and other power dynamics, this perception-based value judgement begs the question of how and why innovative (or deviant) adaptations gain legitimacy. Bawarshi's [40] discussion of genre flexibility adds attention to how power intersects with the genre. Bawarshi asserts that rhetorical genre studies should consider what there is to gain from treating genre differences (perhaps what Tardy would call deviations) differently, rather than considering difference as a part of the norm of all genre performances [40, p. 245].

Taken together, Tardy's theoretical framework for thinking about genre innovation and Bawarshi's attention to how power and agency influence variations in the uptake of a genre suggest that activist technical communicators might find space to reconcile power dynamics through play/innovation/deviance with genres.

Although they feel ubiquitous now, hashtags are a relatively new and emerging genre. They are a particularly important protest genre in the landscape of 21st-century activism. Our contemporary understanding of the hashtag is well summarized by its definition in the *Oxford Dictionary of Social Media*:

A verbal label prefixed with a hash sign (#) used on microblogging and social networking sites such as Facebook, Google+, Instagram, and Twitter in order to associate messages with a common discussion topic. [79]

On Twitter, hashtags initially functioned as an index of trending topics. The earliest uses of the hashtag all correlate with the general core concept of a keyword. We might describe the generic characteristics of hashtags as short markers of content comprised of all lowercase letters without spaces between words; early on, hashtags were also characterized by not having any evaluative or declarative nature, but instead, being comprised almost entirely of their functional use for tracking themes between users and across conversations and time.

Even though the hashtag genre is recent, these early conventions already feel outdated. Using these standards to measure the hashtags associated with *#BlackLivesMatter* and determine how well they align with or deviate from the conventions of the genre underscores differences between the initial conventions of the hashtag genre and the features of the hashtags that have come to characterize this social movement. The following list is a broad sample but is not exhaustive.

#blacktivist #blackis #melanin #icantbreath  
 #neverforget #sayhername #blacklivesmatter  
 #blackpride #blackandproud #westandtogether  
 #proudtobeblack #handsupdontshoot  
 #iftheygunnedmedown #endracism #amerikkka  
 #unapologeticallyblack #blackinamerica  
 #justiceorelse #knowledgeispower  
 #unityinthecommunity #freedomfighter  
 #powertothepeople #activist #blackgirlboss  
 #blackgirlsrock #blackgirlmagic #georgefloyd  
 #breonnataylor

This sample suggests both adherence to and deviation from the genre conventions described above. There are certainly short markers of content that function to track widespread conversations about particular content across users, conversations, and time. But there are many noticeable norm-departures specifically related to the neutral, nonevaluative, nondeclarative nature of the hashtag. Many of the hashtags listed above are meant to be read as assertions.

Are the norm departures used by *#blacklivesmatter* activists innovations or deviations? Are these users simply unfamiliar with the genre and its conventions, as Tardy suggests is the assumption for norm-departures in an academic context? Probably not, because the users are among those most familiar with social media discourse. Instead, these Black activists are making meaningful norm departures in their uptake of the hashtag and the fact that those uptakes are shaped by the historical-material conditions and dynamics of agency and power inherent in American culture to which Bawarshi [40] refers.

Where Bawarshi's analysis of power might satisfy a critical genre analysis of *#BlackLivesMatter* hashtags, a *techné* of marginality extends the genre analysis by insisting that the lived experiences produce the nuanced insights into agency and power be identified as expertise. It encourages a technical communication analysis that focuses on pragmatic, public, and civic action/decision

making by attending to the margins as rich sites of power and perspective from which marginalized rhetors are uniquely qualified to intervene in the hegemonic status quo of the center.

It makes sense then that such a perspective might compose names as hashtags to memorialize the person who was killed unjustly and focus public attention on their humanity rather than the circumstances of their death. A critical embrace of the margins enables Black rhetors to write hashtags as assertions so that they function both within and outside of Black discourse communities simultaneously. Take, for example, the hashtags *#handsupdontshoot* and *#iftheygunnedmedown*. On the one hand, they act as both complex rhetorical moves within the contemporary hush harbor of Black Twitter [80] by using inferences to in-group knowledge that reflect safe and free expression within the community. On the other hand, these hashtags prompt embodied assertions in the form of images curated in tweets that eventually go viral, galvanize support, leverage media attention, and elevate the quotidian Black experience of potentially deadly encounters with police (*#handsupdontshoot*) or biased media coverage (*#iftheygunnedmedown*), to name a few examples.

By bringing the most salient assertions to emerge from Black feminist thought to technical and professional communication, a *techné* of marginality makes a kairotic intervention that marries public Black feminism to socially just technical communication. bell hooks argues that

it is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony. [81, p. 15]

More recently, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has noted that in the last several years, Black feminism has re-emerged as the analytical framework for the activist response to the oppression of trans women of color, the fight for reproductive rights, and, of course, the movement against police abuse and violence. The most visible organizations and activists connected to the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement speak openly about how Black feminism shapes their politics and strategies today [82, p. 10].

Contemporary Black activism is intentionally framed by Black feminist thought and theory

because of its incisive critique and accessible language for analyzing power. The same characteristics that make Black feminism an important frame for Black activism also make the work of Black (and other multiply marginalized rhetors) legible to technical communication scholars and practitioners.

I contend that a Black feminist approach to technical and professional communication helps us not only to recognize and include more rhetors as technical communicators but also to theorize with more nuance about how embodied and lived experiences are mirrored in technical communication practices. Such an analysis reveals how Black queer women lend the flexibility and nuance of their marginalized perspectives to their work as activist communicators who move other people to political action.

### Key Takeaways

1. The expertise and ethos of technical communicators can be derived from specialized knowledge acquired outside of credentialed, subject-matter mastery. Marginalized but pragmatic, lived, and embodied experiences are a way of knowing and doing.
2. Communication tools, technologies, and platforms intersect with asymmetrical power dynamics to influence how communication and action are perceived and whose “work” counts as “technical” or “professional.”
3. Contemporary social, political, and organizational problems require both dominant and marginal rhetorical practices to take solution-oriented action.

### MEMETIC RHETORICAL ENVIRONMENTS BY CARLEIGH DAVIS, A WHITE CIS-HET WOMAN IN HER EARLY THIRTIES

Technical communication as a field of study and practice is inextricably linked with not only the goals but also the processes of activist and social justice movements. After all, the work of organizing such movements, disseminating relevant knowledge, and rhetorically shaping the surrounding discourse is certainly technical communication at its best. In the age of social media, social media platforms often act as the public forums through which these movements coalesce or gain momentum [83]. It is, therefore, essential that we interrogate the rhetorical effect that these platforms have on the movements that evolve within the digital communities that they sponsor. Communication tools, as we know, shape

discourse, and discourse shapes movements. Although many have (rightfully) lauded the grassroots power of social media platforms for achieving activist goals, it is also true that the technology itself has social and rhetorical power, and the algorithmic privileging of majority discourse that is characteristic of many social media sites may, in fact, work counter to the goals of activist movements.

MRT [84] argues that rhetorical action gains persuasive power through successful adaptation to the combination of cultural and technological factors that make up the rhetorical environment. Based at the intersections of memetic or meme theory [44], [85]; cultural rhetorics [37], [38]; and techno-feminist rhetorics [86], MRT highlights the mechanisms through which cultures and the rhetorics that define them evolve. While the effects of this evolution can be culturally positive, negative, or mixed, the process itself relies on the adaptation of new rhetorical actions to existing cultural and technological norms, meaning that actions that challenge one of these norms tend to bolster others.

Conversations about sexual assault were at the forefront of public discourse in the US in October 2017 because of an article published in *The New York Times* exposing Harvey Weinstein’s history of sexual misconduct [87]. The article cited a memo written by Lauren O’Connor, a Weinstein Company employee that outlined details of what O’Connor called “a toxic environment for women at this company” [87]. In particular, O’Connor and many other women, referenced both by name and anonymously within the article, accused Weinstein of abusing his influence and position of authority in the film industry to coerce women into performing sexual acts with him. Within the same article, the authors cite comments from Weinstein’s lawyer, Lisa Bloom, saying that Mr. Weinstein “denies many of the accusations as patently false,” and from Weinstein himself referring to content in Ms. O’Connor’s memo as “off base.” These comments are evidence of a rhetorical move to discredit the accusing women almost as soon as the scandal broke, encouraging the dismissal or interrogation of their accusations by including rebuttals to them in the text of the article where they first come to light.

In response to this scandal and as a way of drawing attention to the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood, actress Alyssa Milano posted a Tweet on October 15 asking all women who have been victims of sexual harassment or assault to respond with “Me Too.”

Her post was wildly successful; by the next evening, the hashtag #MeToo was trending #1 on Twitter, and by December 1, it had spread through Twitter users representing 85 countries [88].

Milano claimed that her goal was to give

some idea of the magnitude of how big this problem is [and] get the focus off these horrible men and to put the focus back on the victims and survivors. [88]

By demonstrating the magnitude of the problem, the #MeToo movement made it more difficult to dismiss individual accusations and instead pointed to these accusations as symptomatic of a pervasive issue within the power structures of Hollywood. #MeToo was demonstrably effective in achieving this goal, as it drastically increased conversations surrounding sexual assault and harassment around the world.

Many articles [89]–[91] also credit the hashtag with increased social acceptance of these kinds of stories when told by women. Reuters reported that calls to US sexual assault hotlines also skyrocketed following the trending of #MeToo, with calls increasing 25% in November 2017 and 30% in December 2017 from numbers the previous year [92]. Repercussions—legal, professional, and social—for sexual misconduct also surged as the movement gained recognition, with prominent figures such as Louis CK, Charlie Rose, Bill Cosby, and many others losing contract deals or their jobs or facing criminal charges for sexual misconduct.

While the claim that #MeToo alone caused these changes would be unsubstantiated, presently, #MeToo is the largest aggregator of sexual assault claims that is publicly available, meaning that the hashtag movement was indisputably successful in generating public conversations surrounding sexual misconduct and in achieving Milano's goal of emphasizing both the magnitude of the problem and the experiences of survivors. This goal was well-suited to the rhetorical ecology on Twitter because Twitter allows for the sharing and aggregation of ideas using #hashtags across groups of users who may not follow one another. Within this platform, #hashtag movements can directly emphasize the number of people discussing a given topic. By using this feature to tag stories of sexual assault or harassment, the #MeToo movement itself was able to function as a demonstration of the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct. This demonstration likewise crossed many boundaries, from geographic to economic, and helped to spark

similar conversations in a variety of locations and industries.

Although this hashtag movement has been a positive cultural influence in many ways, it is also indicative of the strength of overlapping White privilege and socioeconomic privilege as controlling forces in our national discourse. Catherine Rottenberg articulated this problem most concisely when she said,

it is only when powerful, wealthy and mostly White women come forward that influential men have been forced to resign from high-profile positions. [93, para. 3]

It is also true that the successful proliferation of #MeToo on a national scale did not occur until a White, wealthy actress tweeted it; however, the Me Too movement (outside of the #hashtag) actually began more than 10 years prior to both Milano's Tweet and the Weinstein scandal as a campaign built by activist Tarana Burke to help women and girls of color to cope with sexual violence. Burke's movement, although it achieved substantial success as a community effort, did not gain national attention until it was recognized by participants in #MeToo.

Like many modern feminist movements, #MeToo is hindered in its intersectional reach by the persistent privilege of White, wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender women. By building on the established privilege of these women, #MeToo was able to achieve its interventional goal but did so by participating within the confines of existing misogynoir [94] in the ecology of our national discourse. This is not to say that any leaders of or participants in the #MeToo movement post-2017 did so intentionally, but rather that racism, sexism, misogyny, and rape culture are so pervasive within our national discourse that projects that attempt to disrupt them simultaneously do not gain traction.

As these systemic injustices exist offline, they are replicated on social media. Trending topics follow numbers of participants, and although the grassroots power of Twitter as a platform is undeniable, so too is the rhetorical power of public figures who boast huge numbers of followers. As such, Twitter's strength as an activist tool in technical communication—its ability to aggregate interest and therefore create momentum—is also its weakness as a disruptive medium for social change. The systemic oppression of minority groups is replicated and intensified in an algorithmic system ruled by quantifiable

engagement, creating a cycle that cannot be broken except through buy-in by privileged members of majority groups.

### Key Takeaways

1. The technologies that facilitate activist movements on social media mimic offline social conditions, reproducing racial, sexual, and gendered systems of oppression.
2. Activists and allies who speak from positions of privilege must interrogate technological systems that re-embodiment the privilege that we have offline.
3. The rhetorical environments that facilitate digital communication are co-constructed within hegemonic systems of oppression; movements that challenge one of these systems often play into others to gain traction in the environment.

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In engaging “public” technical communication, we do not seek to offer one combined approach to injustices in that communication. Our goal here is not to meld our feminisms into one. Rather, in the spirit of antiessentialism [38], we demonstrate through this article four different approaches to public feminisms and social justice aims. These approaches were produced from our separate experiences, but they have been mediated by our shared conversations and collaborations over several years. They grow out of each of our embodied experiences, and they are influenced by one another.

However, they are—and should remain—distinct. By utilizing critical collaboration, we hope to model for others what it might look like for public feminisms to be live texts, growing and changing in response to the feminist influences around them. We further hope to provide fertile ground in which others might take up and speak back to our work, theorizing and operationalizing new feminist approaches. For example, by utilizing Davis’s understanding of meme culture in combination with Shelton’s take on the Black Lives Matter movement, feminists might think about how ideas proliferate among related social movements in ways that allow us to seek change by addressing those at the margins instead of the centers. Likewise, Frost’s characterization of apparent feminism sheds light on the ways that feminist allies can affect change, even without being recognized as such, while Mckoy’s discussion of ARs provides a lens for an intersectional critique of that process. Together, all four approaches in this article offer avenues for exploring the intersections and negotiations of power structures held up by

technical communication using public feminisms toward social justice.

What might it mean to employ a feminist approach to solve a problem and to also consider critiques of that approach, not (only) from opposing perspectives but from adjacent feminist approaches too? We have laid out our feminisms alongside one another and made the commitment to allow them to interact. Too often, academic arguments adhere to a single, neatly articulated intellectual framework, and industry contexts value frictionless solutions that stifle dissent. When technical communication is leveraged in service of these academic or industry norms, we miss opportunities to value the kinks, knots, tangles, and tears that can generate coalition building for social justice work.

We advocate passionately for the importance of intersectional feminisms drawn from embodied experiences that exist in critical conversation with one another. We argue that intersectional feminisms will necessarily do a better job of engaging the public based on the diverse commitments they ascribe to. In other words, feminisms are more applicable when they better represent the diversity of the people they attempt to attend to.

Although no one person (or small group of people) can ever anticipate or represent the needs and interests of all, we argue that all feminisms and feminists must pay critical attention to race, nation, religion, class, sexuality, ability, and gender identification. Critical collaboration enables such critical attention by acknowledging that technical communicators might start with one feminist approach as a focal point but must also commit to enacting intersectional analysis by engaging laterally with other feminist approaches that derive from other focal points of identity, embodiment, or experience.

By extending our criticality laterally, we are sure to be confronted with questions, tensions, and pushback from other feminists. Our technical communication work must respond to these kinks and knots as they emerge, even if our responses require us to slow down, double back, or regroup. We must see this as a different way to appeal to the value of efficiency in technical communication work. Losing speed and sleekness to gain inclusion and precision is, in fact, a more efficient technical communication outcome.

To engage in feminist work in public or private without considering the ramifications of political

action on the personal lives of diverse people, especially women, would be irresponsible. From our positions within universities, we follow Verjee [3], who argues that some of the elements we might undertake include the following.

- Committing to curricular and pedagogical transformation so that patriarchal histories are not the only ones taught in general education

- Visibly diversifying faculty and staff
- Incorporating social justice as an institutional approach

We further hope to contribute to and take cues from public feminisms, feminisms enacted in public places, and one another, in support of socially just technical communication practice.

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