THE WOMEN'S MARCH AND THE BORDERS OF BELONGING:

Rethinking Collective Space Through Transnational Feminism

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Introduction

On January 21, 2017, at the Women's March in Washington, D.C., a photograph captured two protestors standing shoulder to shoulder, fists raised, holding signs that promoted intersectional feminism (Cargle 2018). Their pose echoed the iconic 1971 image of Dorothy Pitman Hughes and Gloria Steinem, creating a striking visual continuity that linked past and present feminist struggles. This image quickly spread across social media, sparking thousands of responses marked by gratitude, anger, solidarity, and critique. Initially posted on the Women's March Instagram account, where it received over 246 comments, the image was later reposted on X by Feminist Frequency, prompting 54 comments, 1.3k retweets, and 2.5k likes. These metrics point to both its significant reach and its capacity to animate digital feminist discourse.

Given its widespread circulation and emotional resonance, this image does more than simply reference history or pay homage to pioneering feminists. I argue that it serves as a vital bridge, linking the ongoing struggles around inclusion and intersectionality from earlier feminist movements with those that continue to shape feminism today. By invoking this familiar pose and gesture, the photograph creates a compelling visual connection across generations, inviting viewers into what I theorize in this article as a collective space: an emotionally charged digital environment where feminist discourse unfolds in complex and vital ways.

While my research identifies this phenomenon most clearly on Instagram and X, I believe it can still emerge within digital discourse platforms that have comment sections such as Facebook, Reddit, or other platforms. Based on my methodology and research, its defining features include emotional resonance that holds participants' attention, dialogic exchange where support and critique coexist, visibility of difference that prevents the erasure of unequal lived realities, and the potential for mobilization as digital interactions spill into broader feminist activism. Recognizing and naming the collective space allows us to see comment sections not as incidental noise, but as key spaces for transnational feminist praxis, where the tensions and possibilities of solidarity are worked through in public view.

Building on Sara Ahmed's concept of emotional stickiness (Ahmed 2004), this collective space is where emotions, specifically those expressed by Instagram users, circulate and "stick" to both the image and its viewers. Because this image resonated so deeply with me when I first encountered it, I became curious about how others emotionally responded as well. This curiosity gave rise to the case study, aimed at understanding digital reactions to feminist viral images. As I engaged with the social media comments, it became clear that the image functioned as more than just a comment thread. Instead, it created a "collective space"—an emotionally sticky environment within comment sections where feminist discourse unfolds in response to messages about women's rights and related social justice issues. In this space, solidarity, conflict, and identity negotiation continuously emerge and evolve through the interactions of viewers.

Aware of the subjective nature of interpretation, my methodology focused on the emotional tone and recurring themes within the comments. Employing a close reading of the comments, I evaluated the emotional valence of the comments by self-coding. This coding approach, informed by affective science frameworks such as PANAS (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988), allowed me to identify key emotional expressions and thematic patterns. In this way, viral protest images like this one become more than snapshots: they act as sites for negotiating feminist identities and solidarities across differences. Exploring the

comments and reactions that surround these images reveals the complex emotional and political labor involved in sustaining intersectional feminist communities, especially within digital public spheres.

In this article, then, I trace the diverse responses to this image to test and develop the concept of a collective space, theorizing its significance for digital feminist activism. I argue that digital feminist activism creates such collective spaces that simultaneously amplify marginalized voices and foster solidarity, while also reproducing exclusionary dynamics rooted in existing power structures.

To navigate these tensions productively, I focus on implementing ongoing critical engagement, that is, reflexive attention to how privilege, visibility, and voice operate online and a reflexive feminist practice, informed by Carolyn Enns' transnational framework. Together, these practices allow me to engage digital feminist spaces with ethical awareness, recognizing both their limitations and significance, and call for critical attention rather than rejection of digital feminist solidarity practices. First, to situate this analysis, it is important to understand the broader context in which this image and movement emerged.

POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Women's March 2017 (Origins, Leadership Tensions)

The protest that produced this image was itself unprecedented. One day earlier, Donald Trump had been inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States, prompting outrage over his long record of misogynistic and violent comments about women, including the resurfaced 2005 recording in which he bragged about sexual assault (Felmlee et al. 2020, 1). In response, retired lawyer Teresa Shook created a Facebook event calling for a women's march: an individual act of resistance that quickly went viral (1). By January 21, millions of women and allies were marching in the largest coordinated protest in U.S. history, with over 500,000 people in Washington, D.C., alone, and 680 sister marches around the world (2).

Yet, the Women's March also inherited tensions embedded in U.S. feminist history. Shook's initial name for the protest, "The Million Woman March," unintentionally invoked a 1997 protest organized by and for Black women, sparking criticism that the new event reflected the same white-centered tendencies that marginalized and continues to marginalize women of color (2). In response, the organizers invited three women of color—Carmen Perez, Tamika Mallory, and Linda Sarsour—to serve as national co-chairs and to expand the march's leadership and mission to include explicitly intersectional feminist principles. It is these kinds of tensions of inclusion and exclusion that inform digital feminist spaces more broadly. It is precisely within such spaces where solidarity is celebrated but exclusionary dynamics persist that I theorize and test the concept of the "collective space." Here, collective space functions as an analytic lens for understanding how feminist communities negotiate belonging, voice, and visibility across differences.

Women's Rights in America: A Legacy of Exclusion (links to earlier feminist movements and racial politics)

To understand the controversy and hesitancy surrounding the Women's March, it is important to contextualize it within the history of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), which has long grappled with embedded racism. Beginning in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention, early feminist activism focused on voting rights and broader gender equality but was marked by divisions over race (Boylan 2016, 45). For example, many white suffragists opposed Black men's voting rights after the 15th Amendment, leading to a split into two organizations: the National Woman Suffrage Association, which opposed the amendment, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, which supported it. White suffragists often employed racist strategies, prioritizing white women's votes as a counterbalance to African American men, reflecting the movement's focus on white middle-class women's interests (Boylan 2016, 45). Meanwhile, Black women such as Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell formed their own groups advocating for racial and gender equality. The exclusion did not stop there: Black women were often left out of suffrage organizations and

events. Although the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote in 1920, discriminatory practices like poll taxes and literacy tests continued to restrict African American women's voting until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Boylan 2016, 46). This enduring legacy of exclusion and marginalization has informed the critiques and hesitations of women of color toward feminist movements, including the Women's March. In response to these concerns and early criticisms, the Women's March organizers took deliberate steps to revise their mission to explicitly embrace intersectionality, inviting women of color such as Carmen Perez, Tamika Mallory, and Linda Sarsour to take on key leadership roles. Despite concerns about marginalization, the 2017 March saw record-breaking attendance with diverse participation and speeches by figures such as Angela Davis and Kamala Harris. It was the largest protest in U.S. history, with attendance far surpassing previous movements (Felmlee et al. 2020, 1).

These historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion do more than provide context; they also shape the dynamics of contemporary digital collective spaces. Just as women historically organized in physical spaces to assert recognition and negotiate power, comment sections on platforms like Instagram and X function as inherited arenas for similar practices. Hence, the collective space I am establishing here is not built on neutral grounds; rather, it inherits the emotional orientations of past struggles and gains and can be understood as a digital extension of earlier feminist activism in the U.S. The next section introduces transnational feminist theory as a lens for analyzing the complexities of feminist solidarity, identity, and activism in a globalized, digital era.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transnational Feminist Theory

Transnational feminist theory emerged in the early 1990s as a critical response to the limitations of Western feminist frameworks, particularly the idea of a universal womanhood embodied in Robin Morgan's slogan "sisterhood is global." Spearheaded by scholars like Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, this approach highlights how women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by intersecting factors such as race, class, and nation—forces deeply immersed in global structures of colonialism and capitalism (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Morgan 1984).Transnational feminism centers the voices of women often marginalized in mainstream feminism, particularly those from the Global South and immigrant or displaced communities, emphasizing how their lived realities transcend national boundaries (Horne and Arora 2013; Enns et al. 2021).

At its core, transnational feminism seeks to challenge earlier feminist assumptions that tended to universalize oppression and privilege without accounting for historical and structural inequalities on a global scale. Scholars like Srila Roy and Chandra Mohanty have been influential in framing this perspective, showing how global capitalism and colonial legacies disproportionately shape women's labor and lives worldwide (Roy 2021; Mohanty 2003). However, despite its inclusive aims, transnational feminism has faced important critiques. Leela Fernandes points out that, originating in a U.S.-centric academic context, it sometimes risks replicating the exclusions it aims to dismantle (Fernandes 2013). Furthermore, Janet Conway warns that the heavy use of academic jargon, rooted in poststructuralist theory, can alienate activists and communities, limiting the theory's practical reach (Conway 2001). These critiques have prompted calls for clearer, more accessible language, and greater engagement with grassroots movements to ensure transnational feminism's relevance beyond scholarly circles.

In addition, some feminist scholars argue that intersectionality, with its detailed focus on overlapping power structures such as race, class, gender, and ability, offers a framework that better captures the complexity of women's diverse experiences. Increasingly, theorists emphasize the importance of integrating intersectionality with transnational feminism to form a more comprehensive approach to feminist activism and scholarship (Nash 2021; Thayer and Tambe 2021; Chowdhury and Philipose 2016). This integrated perspective acknowledges the global forces shaping women's lives while also attending to the nuanced intersections that produce distinct forms of privilege and oppression.

Transnational feminism also addresses specific issues such as globalization's impact on migration, particularly how stricter border controls

disproportionately affect women from the Global South seeking safety or better opportunities (Mason n.d.). Representation and voice are central concerns, focusing on how narratives about marginalized women are constructed in media and literature, and how these stories carry emotional weight and influence social perceptions (Mason n.d.; Hall 1997). Finally, the theory critically examines violence against women—especially Indigenous and racialized women—highlighting how systemic neglect and misrepresentation obscure the severity of these issues (Mason n.d.). Today, as nationalist and right-wing movements gain strength worldwide, transnational feminism's global perspective is more relevant than ever, offering tools to resist exclusionary politics and support diverse feminist solidarities (Tambe and Thayer 2021). Reflecting on this, it is essential to recognize the long history of exclusion of women of color in feminist movements, as Elora Chowdhury and Liz Philipose (2016) emphasize. Beginning feminist conversations with an awareness of this exclusion lays a crucial foundation for more inclusive activism and scholarship.

As I write this article and explore the history of women's rights in the U.S., I remain acutely aware of the longstanding critiques of white feminism and the exclusion of women of color and other marginalized groups from these movements. Given this history, it is vital to practice reflexivity and acknowledge that all women at this march have varied experiences and face different degrees of oppression. In recognizing the exclusionary nature of historical women's rights movements in the United States, I adopt Elora Chowdhury and Liz Philipose's (2016) approach of starting discussions with an awareness of the historical exclusion of women of color. This recognition is crucial for understanding how feminist discourse continues to be shaped by these exclusions, informing my analysis of contemporary feminist narratives.

Emotional Stickiness and Collective Space

Integral to this approach is Sara Ahmed's concept of emotional "aboutness," explored in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed argues that emotions such as anger and sadness are not simply shared identically but are experienced *about* others' suffering, allowing us to feel connected while recognizing differences in experience. She argues that "the negative emotions of anger and sadness are evoked as the reader's [...] that we "feel sad about their suffering," creating an "aboutness" that ensures they remain the object of "our feeling" (Ahmed 2004, 25).This distinction prevents the erasure of difference, fostering an ethical stance where we acknowledge others as the subjects of our emotions rather than assuming equivalence (25). Ahmed emphasizes the distinction between "the reader and others," noting that the reader's emotions are merely a version of what others experience, but never identical. This nuanced understanding of emotional connection mirrors transnational feminism's emphasis on empathetic listening and solidarity that respects diverse and often unequal lived realities (Roy 2021; Horne and Arora 2013; Enns et al. 2021). Building on this foundation, I call these sites of emotionally charged encounters, such as online comment sections on women's rights, collective spaces: digital arenas where users gather, exchange perspectives, and connect across differences through the emotional stickiness of shared images and stories.

Elaborating further on this framework of emotional connection and listening, I theorize the collective space as a dynamic, emotionally charged arena within digital feminist activism (most visibly in the comment sections of viral protest images) where solidarity, critique, and identity negotiation occur in real time. It is "collective" not because everyone agrees, but because diverse participants are brought into relation through shared engagement with a feminist issue, often mediated by a highly affective image or message. In this space, emotions such as anger, sadness, frustration, and empowerment circulate and "stick" to both the image and to those engaging with it. These affective exchanges draw people together, even when they disagree, which in turn creates a shared, if contested, sense of investment. The collective space, then, is not a perfectly harmonious "safe space," but an active site where feminist solidarities are built, challenged, and reimagined across lines of difference.

METHODOLOGY

Case Selection: The Viral Protest Image

Recognizing and naming the collective space allows us to see comment sections not as incidental noise, but as key arenas for transnational feminist praxis, where the tensions and possibilities of solidarity are worked through in public view. It is through engaging deeply with one such viral protest image that the contours of this collective space became clear to me. This photo stayed with me long after I first saw it. It struck a deeply personal chord, sparking the very thread of thought that would grow into this project. I kept returning to it—not just for its composition or message, but for the way it seemed to collapse time, creating a visual bridge between past and present. In its deliberate echo of earlier feminist iconography, it carried the weight of history while speaking directly to contemporary struggles. When I began reading the comments beneath it, I realized I was not alone: others felt that same spark, though they expressed it in countless different ways. Some responses echoed my sense of connection across time; others revealed entirely different readings, grounded in personal histories, politics, or cultural contexts. It was in that swirl of converging and diverging reactions that the idea of the collective space began to take shape for me, a place where disparate voices could meet, challenge, and transform each other. Looking back, this was how I began weaving the threads together. To deepen my understanding of how this collective space operates in practice, I turned to the rich conversations unfolding beneath the image itself.

Data Collection and Coding Process

The social media comments, as I will show in the next section, offer diverse emotional responses and debates, all marked by how users engage, resist, and connect in digital feminist spaces. To capture this complexity, I undertook a careful manual coding and thematic analysis of the comments, focusing on their emotional tone and recurring patterns. I chose positive and negative as nuanced terms to categorize the comments more generally. To clarify, the terms "positive" and "negative" emotions are understood and used here primarily to describe the emotional tone or valence expressed, rather than to pass judgment on the political or ethical value of those emotions. For example, emotions typically seen as "negative," like anger or sadness, can actually be powerful drivers of political critique and protest, while "positive" feelings such as gratitude and empowerment help build solidarity.

Using a coding framework loosely informed by affective science scales (such as PANAS), I identified emotional keywords and phrasing to categorize comments. Examples of positive comments included expressions of admiration (e.g., "brave," "strong"), gratitude ("thank you," "appreciate"), empowerment ("she represents us"), and collectivity ("we rise together"). Neutral comments were typically brief or emotionally flat, like emojis or hashtags without clear affective content. Negative comments conveyed disapproval or dismissal (e.g., "pointless," "just for show"), or offensive language such as misogynistic or aggressive remarks.

Emotional Valence in Online Responses

In this dataset, out of 168 comments, 84 were coded as positive, demonstrating strong themes of solidarity, inclusion, and support for women's rights, particularly intersectional feminism. For example, one commenter expressed gratitude for the emphasis on inclusion and solidarity, highlighting a shared identity of equality among women. Another commenter passionately acknowledged the neglect of women minorities, emphasizing their increased oppression within society and underscoring the intersectional nature of the feminist message.

Meanwhile, 57 comments were coded as negative, many containing offensive or misogynistic language. For instance, some comments used belittling tropes such as "make me a sandwich," reducing women to stereotypical domestic roles. Others expressed aggressive and hostile sentiments toward the activists pictured, reflecting attempts to silence or punish women for their activism. This opposition frequently centered around exclusionary attitudes and resistance to intersectional feminism. A large portion of the comments, 77 in total, were categorized as neutral, often consisting of polite suggestions or

general observations that did not explicitly engage emotionally or politically. An example includes a respectful comment encouraging person-first language to promote inclusivity within disability discourse.

Several positive comments also directly responded to negative critiques—particularly those questioning the inclusion of white women. These rebuttals invoked historical context to explain feminism's legacy of centering white, cisgender, able-bodied women and argued that calls for intersectionality do not exclude them but rather correct these historical exclusions. All comments were manually coded using consistent affective and thematic criteria applied across the dataset. This method, I suggest, allows for a deeper understanding of the digital conversations around this image, highlighting a dynamic but often contested collective space where feminist solidarity, exclusion, and identity politics come together.

Thematic Overview and Analytical Approach

The coded comments reveal three key themes that shape this analysis: solidarity and inclusion, exclusion and hostility, and historical critique paired with intersectional awareness. These themes suggest the complicated emotional and political dynamics sparked by viral protest images in online spaces. Positive comments tend to cluster around expressions of solidarity, affirming inclusive feminist values and highlighting support for marginalized groups such as women of color, women with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQI+ communities. In doing so, these responses show how the image acts as a site of collective affirmation and identity formation, resonating with Sara Ahmed's concept of affective stickiness.

Using a close reading and manual coding approach, I examine individual comments to unpack how these themes emerge in language, tone, and context. This method allows for a nuanced understanding of the affective investments and contestations shaping feminist solidarity and exclusion in digital feminist spaces. The negative comments on Figure 1 reflect significant opposition to the message of the Women's March, focusing on perceived exclusion of certain groups such as white women or men, alongside broader criticisms of the feminist movement. Thematically, many comments highlight perceived hypocrisy and exclusion, particularly targeting white and Indigenous women. However, the primary focus of exclusion centers on white women being left out.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

White Women and Perceived Exclusion

First, there is a clear repetition of the phrase "white women," with many users expressing anger about their perceived exclusion. In fact, 23 out of 57 negative comments mention white people. This repeated questioning of "Where are the white women?" reflects a strong sense of anger and interrogation, demonstrating that many commenters feel the movement is selectively excluding white women. For instance, @calland_manning_lee states, "Pretty sure we are women too last time I checked," while @micher723 asks, "'All women' not including white women?? Why are we being discriminated upon?!" This questioning is a telling example of white feminism, a concept explained by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as women "individually seeking to protect [their] source of privilege within the hierarchy" (Schuller 2021, 18). When their perceived superiority becomes threatened, a sense of panic often ensues. Similarly, Ruby Hamad argues that white women in America and across the British Empire have historically been deeply invested in maintaining white power structures (Hamad 2019). Within this context, the frustration expressed by these commenters reacts to the movement's focus on amplifying the voices of women of color and other marginalized groups, which they perceive as a threat to white women's power. As Kyla Schuller explains in *The Trouble With White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism*, "Intersectional feminism pushes back against white feminism and advances new horizons of justice" (55). White feminists who aim to preserve their standing within existing power structures resist these new horizons because they challenge the status quo of white supremacy embedded within feminist movements. Thus, the repeated questioning of "Where are the white women?" illustrates this resistance to intersectionality within American feminism, where white women have historically occupied a central role. It is clear,

then, that this repetition and questioning reveal a significant misunderstanding of intersectionality within these comments.

Indigenous Women and Historical Erasure

Returning to the earlier mention of Indigenous women being left out, several commenters express concerns about their exclusion as well. For example, user @lydi.an notes, "These 'intersectional' feminists seem to forget about Native American women just as much as the rest of America does. I don't see how, considering Native American women are the demographic most likely to be sexually assaulted." Similarly, @nmosss363 raises concerns with the comment, "What about Native Women?" These remarks underscore the long history of settler colonial violence and systemic erasure faced by Indigenous women. As reported by The Beacon, a news source for Maine residents, "Indigenous women in the U.S. are murdered at 10 times the national average, and they also disappear at a disproportionate rate—often without a missing person report even being filed, leaving Indigenous families searching for answers" (Neumann 2019). This alarming statistic highlights not only the neglect Indigenous women face in media coverage but also their marginalization within so-called intersectional movements. Importantly, the concern about Indigenous women differs fundamentally from that regarding white women. Whereas the latter reflects a defensive reaction to losing privilege, the former stems from a long history and ongoing reality of severe underrepresentation and violence.

While there are 57 negative comments overall, the remaining 34 include offensive or misogynistic language. For instance, user @ alecchrys comments, "make me a sandwich," a misogynistic trope that belittles and undermines women, reducing them to traditional gender roles by implying their primary value lies in domestic tasks. Another user, @peterhensonjr, offers a highly aggressive and disturbing wish: "These two need to get breast cancer and brain tumors," likely reflecting a desire to silence and punish women for their activism.

A large portion of comments, with 77 in total, were categorized as neutral. These typically offered observations that did not engage directly with the political discourse or interacted in a non-emotional way. For example, user @queen.elizabeth.ann comments on inclusivity by stating, "Using person first language it should be 'women with disabilities' or 'people with disabilities' not 'disabled' it is offensive to some and person first language identifies that person instead of identifying them by just 'disabled' first. Just a thought.. #nohatejusteducate 😊." This functions as a polite suggestion encouraging respect for diverse perspectives within the disability community. Here, the commenter demonstrates an affective attachment to respectful identification of people with disabilities, revealing how comments categorized as "neutral" are *still* shaped by histories of exclusion. By acknowledging that the term "disabled" can be "offensive to some," the user traces a through line of emotional injury that sticks not just to particular words, but to the ways they are ordered and used. In suggesting "people with disabilities" rather than "disabled people," the commenter shows how emotions orient not only around people and histories but also around the subtle structures of language itself. In Ahmed's terms, the emotion of offence circulates through linguistic order, orienting speakers toward more inclusive practices and signaling how linguistic choices carry the emotional residue of past exclusions.

Despite the significant amount of dissenting commentary, there remains a robust contingent of commenters supporting the movement and affirming the messages displayed. Overall, 84 comments were categorized as positive, with prominent themes of solidarity, support, inclusion, and highlighting marginalized women. These positive comments stand in stark contrast to the exclusionary focus of many negative ones. For example, user @ gsugerma writes, "Thank you for the emphasis on inclusion. We must all support each other. We are all equal women." This comment can be analyzed across three dimensions: gratitude, solidarity, and equality. The opening phrase, "Thank you for the emphasis on inclusion," expresses appreciation to the individual holding the sign, recognizing the central message of the movement's embrace of diverse identities and experiences. This sentiment contrasts with the exclusionary frustration voiced in negative comments, reflecting a strong understanding of intersectionality's goals. Next, "we must all support each other" invokes a moral imperative: the word 'must' signals an essential duty which emphasizes that solidarity among women is crucial to the movement's success. Finally, "We are all equal women" asserts a universalist

feminist identity, underscored by the grouping of "equal," "all," and "women," which together evoke a shared collective belonging.

Another positive comment by user @ eliiiprincesss echoes this sentiment: "Exactly. We forget about our women minorities. And they are the more oppressed in our society!!" The opening "Exactly" signals immediate agreement with the inclusionary message. This commenter highlights the neglect of minoritized women, directly stating, "We forget about our women minorities," and invoking collective responsibility by using "we," implicating broader society. By acknowledging this neglect, the comment highlights a core concern of intersectional feminism—that certain groups face heightened oppression within the broader women's rights movement. The comment concludes emphatically: "they are the more oppressed in our society!!" The double exclamation points convey strong emotional investment, signaling passionate support for this issue.

Some positive comments go further, directly responding to negative critiques about the inclusion of white women. For example, user @tufutapa offers a historically grounded rebuttal: "ok i see all these white women in the comments like 'what about us white/skinny/cis/abled women???!?!" here's a little history lesson for y'all: Feminism has ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT WHITE WOMEN. it has a long fucking history of excluding transwomen, women of colour, black women, fat women, disabled women etc all the women mentioned in the pic above. So no, when they are saying 'fight for these women too!' you, as a white woman, are not being excluded because its always been about you." This comment directly challenges the negative comments with an assertive historical critique of feminism's legacy. The tone is confrontational, with phrases like "here's a little history lesson for y'all" mocking the entitlement some white women express when feeling excluded. It emphasizes that feminism has historically centered white, cisgender, able-bodied women while marginalizing trans women, women of color, women with disabilities, and others—groups represented in the image. In this comment, the affective attachments to whiteness become clear: fear and anger adhere to white femininity as it feels its historical privilege threatened, while frustration and corrective insistence attach to marginalized identities claiming space within the movement. This affective encounter exposes clearly how white supremacy itself operates as a "sticky" surface, gathering emotions that both protect and challenge its dominance. By rejecting the idea that white women are now excluded, the commenter reframes calls for inclusion as a necessary corrective to feminism's history. The concluding line, "you, as a white woman, are not being excluded because its always been about you," encapsulates this argument, urging a shift toward an intersectional feminism that prioritizes those most oppressed. Overall, this comment highlights that expanding the feminist movement to focus on marginalized groups does not exclude anyone but addresses long-standing inequalities within feminism itself. Similarly, many positive comments reaffirm intersectional feminist principles while responding to concerns about exclusion.

Emotional Circulation and the Formation of Collective Spaces

This fear of exclusion can be further understood through Sara Ahmed's theory of the "stickiness" of emotions in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed argues that emotions circulate between bodies and shape social relations rather than residing solely within individuals. She writes: "Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others" (Ahmed 2004, 8). In the context of these comments, fear and defensiveness attach to the idea of exclusion, revealing how whiteness has historically been associated with dominance. Ahmed describes how certain words, like racial slurs, accumulate emotional weight through repeated harmful use (8). Similarly, whiteness becomes "sticky" in discussions of exclusion, where its historical centrality causes feelings of threat when it is challenged or marginalized. In these exchanges above, we see how emotions are not just circulating, but accumulating around certain bodies, shaping how these bodies are read within the discourse. For instance, this repeated defensiveness of commenters invoking "white women" reveals how affective attachments to whiteness begins to shape bodies. Here, fear and anger adhere to the idea of hierarchical white femininity; when this hierarchy is challenged, its historical centrality is threatened including all of the times when it was presumed "default," and "ideal." In this analysis, these emotions of fear orient women away from solidarity like a reverse magnet and draw them toward self-preservation in order to maintain this hierarchy. In turn, this orientation is

one way of witnessing what Kyla Schuller suggests: how white feminists preserve their standing within existing power structures is to resist any change because any shift may challenge the status quo of white supremacy within feminist movements. On the other side, frustration expressed by feminists who support intersectionality also circulates and sticks, creating a contrasting emotional current. Many positive comments respond to fear and anger with irritation or disappointment, highlighting the tensions within feminist discourse. For example, @brainwa.shed's comment states: "Well said. Until we have equality for everyone, we don't have equality. It's really sad that so many people calling yourself feminists forget about it."

Here, sadness signals emotional weight behind the disappointment, illustrating the affective investment in inclusive feminism. The emotional valences identified in the comments—fear, defensiveness, frustration, sadness—reflect this circulation and stickiness of emotions that shape feminist identities and solidarities in online spaces, building what I call a collective space. By examining the responses to viral protest images, transnational feminist scholarship is able to expand, helping us scholars understand how feminist solidarity is both formed and challenged in digital public spheres. These discourses, as seen in the results, highlight ongoing tensions around inclusion, identity, and power that are often invisible in more traditional accounts of feminist movements. Far from being merely sites of fragmentation or negativity, online comment sections can actually reveal the emotional and political labor involved in negotiating collective spaces across differences. Engaging with these digital conversations is therefore an important step toward understanding how transnational feminism operates in practice, acknowledging both its possibilities and its limits. Hence, I suggest that a step towards developing transnational feminism in the context of digital spaces could be to begin recognizing online comment sections as essential arenas that reveal ongoing exclusions and power imbalances, making visible what many would prefer to remain hidden or ignored.

By examining these digital conversations, we begin to see why it is important to name and theorize these essential online arenas—what I have been calling collective spaces throughout this paper. These are digital spaces, as we have seen, where users come together collectively to engage in feminist discourse, regardless of their social positions or perspectives. Because emotions circulate and stick within these spaces, the images become more than just pictures; they become adhesive, viral sites that hold people together through shared feeling and contested meaning. Naming these spaces helps us better understand how solidarity and conflict unfold simultaneously in digital feminist activism.

Limitations and Conclusion

Finally, while this analysis offers us a small glance of the importance of digital feminist discourse within a specific U.S.-centered context, it is still important to acknowledge the limitations of this single case study. Because transnational feminism demands attention to diverse regional, cultural, and linguistic contexts beyond North America, future research should examine viral protest images and their comment threads from a variety of global locations to better understand how digital collective spaces operate across different feminist histories and socio-political environments. Such comparative work is imperative because it will show both shared and distinct challenges faced by feminist movements worldwide. In this way, the analysis of viral images and their comment threads becomes more than a snapshot of digital culture: it becomes a critical site for transnational feminist praxis, highlighting both the challenges and possibilities of building solidarity in an era marked by persistent inequalities and digital mediation.

Figures

Fig. 5.1 — Two individuals holding signs and clenching their fists in a resistance pose. The signs state, respectively: "Protect: Black, Asian, Muslim, Latinx, Disabled, Trans, Fat, Poor, WOMEN" and "If you don't fight for all women, you fight for no women."

Fig. 5.2 — Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes raising their fists in solidarity, circa 1971. The image has become an iconic representation of interracial feminist alliance and activism in the United States.

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