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Bridging the Feminist Generation Gap: Intersectional Considerations

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In my Sex, Power, and Politics class it is often easy to convince students of the ways in which feminist political activism is radically different from the women's movements of the 19th century. Grappling with how "slut shaming" has changed from Hawthorne's story of Hester Prynne (*The Scarlet Letter*) to Emma Stone's ironic performance in the film *Easy A* to pop star Miley Cyrus' "twerking" in an MTV performance with singer Robin Thicke is an easy feat for my late-millennial generation students. They are far less comfortable, however, with the idea that there are troubling continuities in the topics of that political activism. It is thus harder for them to see the continuities and ongoing challenges as part of a longstanding rationale for a perpetual women's movement. These continuities are seen more clearly by baby boomer feminists, the bulk of whom came to consciousness as second-wave feminists.

Thinking of informal politics in the United States, we can consider (1) the shifting kinds of conversations about how women create movements and whether what has changed is truly revolutionary; (2) the narratives U.S. women create to make their case; and (3) the possibility of a truly egalitarian, cross-generational women's movement. In so doing we can acknowledge the persistent challenge of simultaneous privilege and disadvantage in increasingly complex ways.

My book, *Solidarity Politics for Millennials* (Hancock, 2013), argues that privilege and disadvantage coexist not just in our world, but also within any given person, group, or social movement. Meaningful recognition of this coexistence has been incredibly difficult for many, if not most, social

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movements, including most women's movements. However one millennial-led movement, the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) movement, seems to get it right. DREAM activists, many of whom are members of the LGBT community, articulate and enact a form of deep political solidarity that powerfully embraces intersectionality theory. They do so even in a fast-paced political environment where victories and defeats often occur within days or months of each other.

I use the term "intersectionality" here as a way to signal both a normative commitment to socially just outcomes and as an analytical framework especially suitable to understanding pragmatic impediments to a broadly just and inclusive women's movement. Feminists, of course, have long been part of the intellectual history of intersectionality. Thinking in this way of intersectionality as a framework has deep roots inside (Combahee River Collective 1978; Dill 1983; Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Hill Collins 1990) and outside of the United States (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983). Most unique to this framing of intersectionality as a framework is its breadth beyond the stereotypical claim of "race + class + gender identities are more than the sum of their parts" to include diversity within categories of difference and the role of social, political, legal, and economic structures in shaping unjust outcomes and social movement agendas.

This conception of intersectionality shapes LGBT DREAM Activists' ability to contest both homophobia and discriminatory deportation practices. By "coming out as undocumented," activists take the first step in building an intersectional social movement that can connect with multiple historical social movements. Likewise, this "both/and" stance connects with mainstream marriage equality movements by pressing for equal treatments of binational same-sex couples in immigration proceedings, as well as advocating for a largely documented immigrant women of color Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights. Neither position limits their core commitment to comprehensive immigration reform (C.I.R.), and in fact expands the folks within the tent who support C.I.R.

The lessons provided by the DREAM activists are too numerous to consider sufficiently in this context, so I focus here on just two: (1) the unapologetic simultaneous and comparable embrace of categories previously considered "in the closet" and "in the shadows" and (2) unqualified support for similarly situated movements to do the same for themselves as groups bonded into a movement due to both government policies and categorical identities that shape their political experiences in the world. Even as they win victories for their movement (e.g., the

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California DREAM Act), activists stand in solidarity with those whose battles (e.g., California domestic workers) continue. More to the point, they explicitly acknowledge the privilege that such victories bestowed on them and push to share it with their older, undocumented compañeros through their lobbying in Washington and with the immigrant women of color domestic workers, whose bill was initially vetoed by California Governor Jerry Brown (D) in 2011.

The narratives created by these activists were able to simultaneously acknowledge roles for sexual orientation, immigration status, race/ethnicity, and gender *and* acknowledge the part they were obligated to play in other movements' pursuit of justice. Instead of turning a blind eye or languishing in their victimhood, these activists — LGBT, undocumented — instead used privilege to expand access for others.

Now consider a contrasting case, which is sadly emblematic of the norm experienced among contemporary feminist movements. At a June 2013 fundraiser for the Democratic Party in Washington, DC, First Lady Michelle Obama was heckled by Ellen Sturtz, an activist from Get Equal, an LGBT rights group committed to civil disobedience. When Mrs. Obama stepped away from the podium and indicated her willingness to immediately leave the fundraiser, the reactions of both Sturtz and mainstream feminist activist groups like CODEPINK varied dramatically from the example of DREAM activists' recognition of categorical multiplicity and the simultaneity of privilege and disadvantage.

Sturtz, who was never directly addressed by the First Lady, later said she felt "scared" and "threatened" when Mrs. Obama stepped away from the podium. It was troubling that Sturtz spoke as if blithely unaware of the racial implications of these personal reactions, even as she had initiated the confrontation as an act of civil disobedience and free speech. Sturtz remained focused on herself as a singly disadvantaged person, refusing in that moment to see her race privilege persisting even in relation to the First Lady of the United States, or her age advantage. The deep political solidarity shaped by thorough commitment to the normative ideals of intersectionality instead would have empowered Sturtz to recognize and hold a space for her personal privilege as well as her persistent disadvantage.

In a similar vein, CODEPINK tweeted that Mrs. Obama should have smiled and been more polite than she was, unleashing a firestorm of tweets from everyone, including this author, to Alicia Keys (and somehow I think Alicia Keys got more attention!) demanding a retraction. When they did so, they tweeted an apology about how they

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had "respect for intersectionality" and "would now go back and look at their own practices." But why hadn't they reflected on their own practices before sending the tweet?

Black Girl Dangerous, a nonprofit and online site that amplifies the voices of queer and transexual women of color, actually has a far more incisive way of talking about actions of activists like Sturtz and CODEPINK — one that is far more in-your-face but has the potential to really shock older mainstream feminists (and I include myself in at least the older feminist part; I don't know how mainstream I am) into thinking through and grappling with the issues in a way that truly hears younger feminists, particularly younger transgender feminists of color. It is here the blunt conversation about privilege can finally begin. On a poster entitled, "How Not to Be an Ally," Black Girl Dangerous creator Mia McKenzie (2013) lists eight acts sure to undermine solidarity. Three acts speak directly to this context:

> **Assume one act of solidarity makes you an ally forever.**
> Remember that time your uncle said that fucked-up stuff about "illegal" Mexican immigrants and you were all, "Actually, Uncle, California *is* Mexico, so you need to read your history cuz that's hella racist!" That shit rocked, bruh. And it totally means that you are an Ally with a capital A for, like, ever! Done and done. Let's go get a celebratory slurpee. But you know what else? Nope. Being an ally takes waaaay more practice than that. It is a constantly active and evolving thing. I mean, imagine labeling yourself a great lover after you ate pussy once. That would be cray, wouldn't it?
> **Make everything about your feelings.**
> The hurt feelings that resulted when you were called out on racism/transphobia/ableism/etc. are totally more important than the impact of the actions you are being called out for in the first place. Really. I'm not even being facetious. Psych! I mean, I know it *feels* like your feelings are Consideration #1, but they're not. I have been guilty of this ridiculousness myself in the past. I think everybody is guilty of it sometimes. But that still doesn't make it okay. Try to remember that people who have been impacted by your racist/transphobic/ableist/etc. words or actions are the ones whose feelings need attention right then. Not yours.
> **Don't see race/gender/disability/etc.**
> You know what I love? When people don't see my race. There is nothing more affirming for me as a person than to have essential parts of myself and my experience completely disregarded. I mean, inside we're all the same. And there's only one race: the HUMAN race! Amirite??? Ugh.

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Solidarity Politics for Millennials contends that the practice of deep political solidarity is not an episodic, one-time Herculean effort to win. It is instead very much like learning a new language, where we are ushered into a culture of practices and a discourse about power that will easily become incomprehensible without frequent efforts to speak and act out solidarity. Put another way, how many of us took languages in high school that we can no longer speak, whether it has been 2 years or 20 (or more) since we graduated? Engaging in deep political solidarity requires similar vigilance.

I make these arguments not as an academic removed from the fray, but as a scholar-activist who must accept that as a third-wave feminist, I, too, am implicated in not having gotten this privilege-disadvantage blind spot resolved in the 1980s and 1990s. By this I mean resolved in a way that would at least pave a path along which millennials could build, improve, critically analyze, and move forward in a more innovative way.

Do we need a 21st-century women's movement? As fraught as such a movement might be, and despite the need to overcome the generational and cultural challenges feminists face, the answer is, *yes*.

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