



Part 1 - How Black Social Media Spaces Shape How We Talk About Sexual Harassment, Assault, and Abuse

📅 November 10, 2023

👤 Feminista Jones



This is the first excerpt of a two-part interview. Be sure to read the second part [here](#).

1. Black Twitter has been largely responsible for being the cultural shaker for prominent online and in-person social movements like #OscarsSoWhite, #BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo. In your opinion, why do you believe Black Twitter is so powerful in shifting online conversation?

I think Black Twitter has one of the most cohesive community vibes. When we think about different factions of Twitter, I think you could see people associated

with those sections. You have right-wing, liberal, all of those things like that, but a lot of them don't actually know each other or interact with each other beyond what the purpose of that connection is. Like, if they're fans of Kamala Harris...that's all they really talk about, but that's how they connect and identify. I think with Black Twitter, it really is just a space where people come together from all walks of life and all experiences. We'll talk about all kinds of things, not limited to just talking about...being Black, for example. I think that there's a feeling of "We know each other." Even if you don't like somebody, even if you never met them, there's still this knowledge of "I know these people." So I think that particular sense of community makes things a little different, and I think the way it leads to impact is because you can have community kind of moving in one accord in some ways. Like when you see a lot of major hashtags and things like that. Even the funny ones [hashtags]...I think the funny ones are a better example of how the community comes together and has an impact because it's something so many people can find relatable. Everybody comes together over that sense of understanding and community, and that leads to greater impact.

2. In feminist spaces, historically and contemporarily, the intersection of racism and sexual violence has been largely unacknowledged. With the advent of social media, how have Black feminists been able to hold that conversation online with Black survivors?

We have to think about social media as a public sphere, and we think historically, "Who has been able to control the public sphere? Or, at least, the discourses in the public sphere?" It's usually people with money, with influence, with power, with access. What social media has done is it has made the public sphere more accessible to anyone who's willing to stand on the soapbox. So, we are able to have conversations with people that probably were never noticed before, because of this public sphere. When you bring Black feminists into this space, when you bring Black survivors into this space, and then you bring onlookers and people who don't identify as either, and then they're all kind of gathered. You think of it like a townsquare, they're all kind of gathered there, and different people are saying different things. Folks are able to go around and learn from different people without having to go through a university or pay for anything. You can just kind of go around. I think that has been helpful for survivors who have never had

access to Black feminist thought and some of the healing powers within that. There's a lot of guidance and blueprints for survivors that maybe these people didn't have access to because they weren't in that public sphere.

I also think that Black feminists have the opportunity to go beyond the ivory tower. They're able to reach more people on a common level. I think about that a lot because I'm teaching a class right now called "The Black Woman", where I've had students look at these different theoretical frameworks but also discuss, "Why isn't this more accessible to people? Why don't people know about these things?" Their biggest issue is, "Well, you know, it's all academic." What we've seen social media do is kind of force Black feminists to meet people where they are, bring it out of the academy, and make it more accessible. We've also seen people meeting Black feminists along the way, and wanting to learn from them and go from there.

3. #MeToo very famously took over various social media outlets and inspired a cultural reckoning surrounding sexual assault. Yet, due to how viral it became after a series of white celebrities used it, many do not know that the idea behind the hashtag came from a Black woman and a predominantly Black social media space. Without this context, do you think that there is something missed in the understanding of #MeToo?

That's interesting because I think that people have tried to have that conversation. While Tarana is a Black woman, I don't think that she started #MeToo to just be about Black women's experiences. I think she just happened to be a Black woman. There definitely were conversations about how race factors into experiences with sexual harassment and things like that...but it wasn't just for Black women. It's just that Black women have more access to it because she was a Black woman, and we operate in our own silos and our own separate communities, and if you didn't know who she was, then you just didn't know who she was. The same way that people who don't know who I am just don't know who I am. It doesn't mean that everything I do is about Black women. I don't think she intended to be exclusive with her original concept. So, what happened, where I think race really got pulled in, was in conversation about erasure. It was like,

Black women throughout the feminist movements over the century have often had these innovative ideas or created these things that went unrecognized. Things that happen to all women that were unrecognized because they were Black. Because they didn't have access to larger platforms or the microphone. They couldn't write about them in major publications. Then white women would come along and either co-opt them or pretend they came up with the idea themselves or even be patronizing to Black women in an "I'll take you under my wing" kind of thing. That, I think, is where the racial lens comes in with that particular conversation.

I think another good example is looking at Dorothy Pittman Hughes. We wouldn't have a Gloria Steinem without a Dorothy Pittman Hughes. I recently wrote about her, and I was just like, "This woman was doing tremendous feminist work, in and around New York City, and working with other organizations. Gloria basically apprenticed under her and learned from her. Learned how to be a public speaker. Everywhere Gloria was going, Dorothy was right there. But, when she passed away, people were like, 'Who's that?'" So, it's that kind of thing. That's where I think the racial conversation comes into erasure, and what the media does to kind of erase Black women's voices.

Everyone knows the photo of Gloria standing next to a Black woman with her fist raised. They just don't know that Black woman's name and it's Dorothy Pittman Hughes. That kind of speaks to it. Gloria...we talked about how the media was more focused on her because she was white, but that wasn't right. Until Dorothy's last day, Gloria was supporting projects that she was doing. It's just, the fact that she was kind of erased from our feminist knowledge is really messed up. I think that people knew that, and they'd seen that happen so many times. Like, you can go back to Dorothy Height, and other folks like that, and people were like, "We're not letting that happen to Tarana." I think there was kind of that, "No, she's not going to be erased." I think we are super protective, and that social media allows us to be like, "No, this is what the truth is, and you need to know what the truth is because we're not letting you erase us anymore."

4. In your [talk](#) with Beacon Press Editor Rakia Clark, you observe that, because of the Black tradition of "call and response," that, "Black women excel [at Twitter] because it is their natural communication style." Since Twitter is based in this communication style, do you

think it eases the ability for Black users to communicate about hard-to-discuss issues like sexual assault more than other social media platforms?

If you'd asked me this maybe five years ago, I would have said, "For sure." But right now, I just don't think it's a safe space for anyone to talk about any of that stuff. I think that, again, we had this sense of community and protection, but Twitter, for example, has been infiltrated with bots and with people causing chaos and dissent intentionally. It's just not worth it anymore. That's why you don't really see much of that anymore. You really do not see hashtags popping off anymore, because people are just like, "No, I'm not creating a space to have it inundated with trolls and bots." But back in what I would consider the heyday, in 2013-2017, you definitely saw a lot more of that because people felt a lot more comfortable. They felt like the people they were interacting with were actually real people. Now, we know that these are not real people. These are not real accounts. These are bot farms and people reclaiming old accounts and causing chaos. So, we don't even bother to have the conversations anymore. But back in the day, the format definitely facilitated conversation.

But I would say not anymore, especially with all these changes that have been made since Elon Musk took over. It's just kind of like, nobody wants to be bothered.

This blog post was published in The Resource 2023 online magazine special issue on [Racial Equity in the Movement](#).

About the Author:



Feminista Jones is an educator, feminist writer, public speaker, community activist, and retired social worker. She is an award-winning writer and the author of the critically acclaimed [Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists Are Changing the World From the Tweets to the Streets](#) (Beacon). Her work centers around diversity, inclusion, and equity, queer identity, race and culture, feminism and intersectionality, mental health, and social work. She is a Ph.D. candidate at Temple University where she also teaches courses on the African American Queer Experience, The Black Woman, Race and Media, and others related to the intersections of race, gender, and sexual identity.
