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History retweeting itself: imperial feminist appropriations of “Bring Back Our Girls”

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ABSTRACT
Racist and imperialist narratives have long underpinned White and “Northern”/“Western” feminists’ representations of people of color and of Africans. Through textual analysis, this essay places Bring Back Our Girls—the recent campaign to locate and return 276 abducted Nigerian students—in the context of this troubled history. Within the Global North, both the appropriation and abandonment of Bring Back Our Girls fundamentally relied upon a conceptual framework rooted in imperialist and racist histories. By revealing the imbrication of the international campaign in existing power relations, this project challenges the assertion that digital campaigns are technologically determined or “outside” history.

On April 14, 2014, the militant group Boko Haram abducted 276 girls from Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria (Ashionye Ogene 2014). Days later, Nigerian lawyer Ibrahim Abdullahi tweeted quotes from a public address on the abductions by the former Nigerian Minister of Education, Obiageli Ezekwesili. Abdullahi included Ezekwesili’s phrase “Bring Back Our Girls,” which became a “viral” hashtag, spreading across national boundaries to users well-removed from (and previously oblivious to) Boko Haram’s violence (Anne-Marie Tomchak 2014). As the campaign grew, it garnered increasing criticism, much of which focused on its use of digital expressive forms. Commentators termed Bring Back Our Girls “hashtag activism” (Gary Bauer 2014; Ben Scott 2014), reducing the campaign to the “viral” circulation of its eponymous phrase. Some openly negated the movement, terming it “slacktivism” (Sara Tandy 2014) or “clicktivism” (Jocelyn Spottiswoode 2014), a feel-good effort that improved the self-esteem of activists but failed to produce palpable results.

Critiques of “Bring Back Our Girls” as slacktivism, however, neglect consideration of the context in which the campaign arose, and mistakenly presume the campaign maintains a single, stable meaning across contexts of race and nation. These critiques tie the campaign’s ineffectiveness to the inherent limitations of new media and contemporary activist forms. In contrast, this analysis of Bring Back Our Girls emphasizes the ways that support of the hashtag, both within Nigeria and across the African diaspora, often coexisted with “offline”
protest. It also distinguishes between iterations of the campaign executed by communities of committed activists and efforts that only superficially broached the circumstances of the girls’ abduction or that called upon existing systems of power (such as the United States military) to intervene. It thus shifts the focus of Bring Back Our Girls critiques to include a nuanced awareness of the campaign’s simultaneous subversive and hegemonic threads. By troubling the applicability of a “digital/material” divide, locating Bring Back Our Girls within a contemporary moment that divide cannot define, and situating the campaign within a history of imperial and racist feminisms (as well as critiques of the same), this project argues that the limitations of the campaign correspond with its imbrication in a history of imperial power rather than its use of new media. Further, it contrasts the initial Nigerian-born Bring Back Our Girls campaign with other “slacktivist” projects—such as Kony 2012—originally conceived within the framework Teju Cole identifies as “the white savior industrial complex” (2012). Ultimately, this approach allows for the re-centering of the activists most directly involved with the campaign, as well as their calls for international support, and their critiques of the imperial and racist assumptions that often underscore such solidarity.

#BringBackOurGirls and slacktivism

Understanding whether Bring Back Our Girls constitutes slacktivism requires an investigation of the term. Although in contemporary usage “slacktivism” often functions as a criticism, initially the term included positive connotations, e.g., as a means for accessible, “bottom-up” activism (Henrik Serup Christensen 2011). Today, however, the term often communicates an express negativity toward the campaigns to which it is applied. Evgeny Morozov, the New Republic editor widely credited with popularizing this portmanteau, defines slacktivism as “an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (2009). By definition, for Morozov, “slacktivism” denotes not simply a decrease in effort, but also a decrease and utter negation of impact. The term, in Morozov’s use, also fundamentally links ineffective, feel-good activism with campaigns that utilize the Web (i.e., “feel good, online activism”). In so doing, this critique presumes the discrete separation of online and offline spheres, between digital efforts and material ones. It also suggests that effective activism occurs only or primarily in the purportedly unmediated “offline” realm. Within frameworks like Morozov’s that fundamentally link slacktivism to the Web, interventions that occur solely or primarily online are necessarily deemed lazier and ineffective in addressing “concrete” social problems.

Explaining the inefficacy of “slacktivist” campaigns as primarily the result of digital forms fails to account for parallel pitfalls in “offline” activist projects. A substantial body of critical critique identifies equally superficial, “feel-good” engagement with social problems through non-digital media. For example, kinesiology and health studies scholar Samantha King critiques “pink ribbon” breast cancer campaigns for capitalizing on the increasing “tendency to deploy consumption as a major avenue of political participation” (2006, xxv), a trend toward “commodity activism” which Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee also challenge (2012). While the majority of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign does not function as commodity activism, per se, it shares a reliance on decorative markers of participation, including specific colors (pink for King, red for Bring Back Our Girls), and other symbols of affiliation (e.g., nonprofit mailing list memberships or page “likes”). Bring Back Our Girls, in certain instances, also shares with commodity activism a model that obscures “the relations
of inequality, obligation, and exploitation that structure well-intentioned charitable practices” (King 2006, 124).

Considered in this context, the recoloring of a profile picture or display of a web-badge becomes legible as an iteration of the same patterns that lead to color-coded ribbons and politicized purchases. Such overlaps belie the contention that the efficacy of activism is primarily the result of its use (or avoidance) of Web media. In other words, when these methods fail, they fail across the digital/material divide. They fail because of the limitations of awareness-raising and affective social justice projects, not because of the limitations of the arenas in which these projects occur.

Furthermore, as technologies grow increasingly mobile, the purported separation between the digital and material arenas cannot hold. Today, participants in a social change campaign—such as Bring Back Our Girls—might learn of the issue online, re-post a call to wear red on a specific day, meet with others also wearing red, snap a photograph of the group, and post that image to the Web. Such expressions trespass the boundary between activism that occurs online and activism that occurs “IRL” (in real life). They thus expose the tenuousness of that boundary. Are activists who live-tweet remarks from a rally they attend working online or off? What about activists who live-stream the physical violence that compels the rally? Such instances, not to mention the materiality of the devices and institutions that underlie them, belie the clear division between the “virtual” and the “real.” If, at one point, one could identify a firm distinction between the two, the ubiquity of new technologies and new media has eradicated that possibility. More likely, such advances have made the illusion of that divide, however culturally entrenched, increasingly difficult to maintain.

Indeed, research continually questions the reality of this divide. Social scientist Lisa-Jane McGerty, for example, suggests that the “tendency to consider Internet users as either online or offline, but rarely as both” undermines attempts to theorize digital expression (2000, 896). She argues that, when scholars remain unduly loyal to spatialized concepts of the Web, they “[fail] to locate users firmly within the context of their use” (896). In spite of this tendency, as digital communication scholar Steve Jones has long argued, “on-line experience is at all times tethered in some fashion to off-line experience” (1999, xii). Therefore, theorists must abandon the illusion that “computer-mediated communication […] takes place in a kind of virtual vacuum with little connection to the material worlds of the people sitting in front of computer screens” (Rodney H. Jones 2004, 21).

Such research emphasizes the inextricability of digital and material expressions. McGerty insists that “the real and the virtual constitute each other” and notes that “an individual can never be online without being offline too” (2000, 896). Ultimately, the material is the digital and vice-versa. Given this, scholars such as sociologist Lori Kendall reject the image of the Web as a utopia/dystopia for disembodied communication, instead contending that “gendered, raced, and classed identities continue to have salience in online interactions” (1998, 150).

Bring Back Our Girls and similar contemporary campaigns occur in a context in which the digital and the real are fundamentally imbricated. The rallying cry at the heart of the campaign originated at a protest in Lagos, gained attention on Twitter, and fueled further outreach on the Web and in the streets. Activists met weekly at the Unity Fountain in Lagos to host “Speak Out Saturdays” insisting on the safe return of the Chibok students (Samuel Okocha 2014). Within two months, the tenacity of the protestors so unsettled the Nigerian government that police prohibited further public assemblies (Zoe Mintz 2014). Activists
continued, undeterred. They marched, recorded news interviews, filmed documentaries, wore red, tweeted, and retweeted. The campaign began in the “real” world and continued there. The digital expressions were part of that broader reality, and thus, were implicated in its histories and systems of power.

“Bring Back Our Girls” in imperial context

Such systems of imperial and racial power provide a strong foundation for analyzing the fate of the campaign. Thus, it is worth shifting consideration from Bring Back Our Girls in relation to new media to Bring Back Our Girls in relation to its imperial context. The destabilization of the digital/material divide compels scholars and activists to reconsider campaigns like Bring Back Our Girls within a broader context of contemporary and historical activism. The successes and failures of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign relied not only on its use of new technologies, but also on its imbrication in much older power structures, histories, and conceptual frameworks. A fuller understanding must thus situate the campaign within an intersection of new media and old imperial habits.

Antiracist and post-colonial feminists have long criticized iterations of feminism—primarily among White women and those in the Global North—that erase other women’s experiences, needs, and goals. Scholar-activist Vron Ware argues that “[feminist] ideology and practice were shaped by the social, economic and political forces of imperialism to a far greater extent than has been acknowledged” (1992, 119). From the early concerns of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill that (White, Northern) women would have to suffer “like the poor African slaves” (Mary Wollstonecraft 1792/1973, 66) or those “in the harem of an oriental” (John Stuart Mill 1870, 144), imperialist and racist claims have regularly influenced feminist theory and practice within the Global North. Ware argues that the unwillingness among such feminists to engage with their imperial history results in projects that are “less effective in understanding and changing oppressive ideologies of race, class and gender today” (1992, 229).

In other words, this imperial history contributes to a neocolonial present, which continues to rely upon the racialization of “Othered” women of color in the Global South, as foils for the construction of “civilized” White and Northern identities. Moreover, as humanitarian Valerie Amos and filmmaker Pratibha Parmar note in “Challenging Imperial Feminism,” racism in such efforts continues to manifest not only in “analyses of racism […] lacking from that work” but also in “the ways in which […] Black women have been made ‘visible’ in such writings” (1984, 44). Essentially, while feminists’ erasure of women in the Global South certainly misleads their analyses, the representation of such women—for example, as perpetual victims who lack agency and subject status (Chandra Talpade Mohanty 1991b)—also does more harm than good.

Activists today continue to engage social problems—such as the abduction and purported trafficking (quoted in Ludovica Iaccino 2015) of the Chibok students—within a symbolic context shaped by imperial and racist presumptions. As feminist studies and education scholar Shenila Khoja-Moolji argues, the “eagerness” of supporters in the Global North “to take up hashtag feminism on behalf of third world schoolgirls from Nigeria betrays the awareness and histories that they bring to feminist activism” (2015, 348). Khoja-Moolji links the enthusiastic support of the campaign to the comfortable fit between the narrative of the abductions and an “all too familiar trope of the threat of Muslim terrorists, especially...
towards women” (2015, 348). Likewise, feminist scholar Eleanor Tiplady Higgs suggests that the Kenyan-born hashtag campaign #JusticeForLiz may have appealed to a Northern audience “precisely to the extent that it could be read in line with dominant perceptions of Africa” (2015, 345). New media betrays old patterns.

This is not to suggest, however, that imperialism and racism do not create new challenges through their intersections with new media and other contemporary technologies. Indeed, the parameters of Web technologies further complicate existing tensions. As Higgs argues, the attempt to “[present a] campaign in 140 characters or fewer on Twitter results in an over-simplification of the issue in abstraction from its context”, which is “of particular concern when African-originated campaigns cross national and cultural borders to engage a primarily Western audience” (2015, 345). Bring Back Our Girls—as a campaign that circulated far beyond its original Nigerian context—illustrates this claim. Critiques of Bring Back Our Girls, however, rarely examined its contingent meanings or shifting power structures. Instead, these analyses paralleled arguments raised against the “Kony 2012” effort two years earlier. Therefore, a further examination of Kony 2012 allows us to consider when such comparisons are fruitful and when they may be misguided or limiting.

Launched by Invisible Children, a United States nonprofit founded in 2004, Kony 2012 sought to raise opposition to the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a militant group ravaging Uganda. The campaign centered on a thirty minute YouTube video, which—according to media scholar Graham Meikle—“[framed] the fact that Kony [was] still at large […] as a problem of visibility” (2014, 376) and urged viewers to contact US politicians and celebrities in an effort to “make Kony famous” (376). Invisible Children argued that once the world knew of the atrocities committed by Kony and the LRA, the United States and other world powers would intervene, effectively bringing peace to the Ugandan people within the calendar year.

The Kony 2012 video drew a hundred million YouTube views within a record-breaking one-week period (Meikle 2014, 373). However, the succeeding actions proposed in the video drew significantly less support than Invisible Children projected (379). The filmed public breakdown of Invisible Children co-founder, Jason Russell, further diminished public commitment to the cause (374). If Invisible Children has successfully made Kony famous, that success was deeply ironic; the “fifteen minutes” allotted allowed no time to undermine his power.

Activists and academics alike have examined the rise and fall of the Kony 2012 campaign, attributing its demise to everything from a failure of participatory politics (Meikle 2014, 379–381) to the limitations of social media (Charlotte Robertson 2014). However, early critiques of the campaign—largely from Ugandan and diasporic activists—raised altogether different arguments. Rosebell Kagumire, for example, noted the apparent obliviousness of both Invisible Children and its supporters to the larger context of life in Uganda and the decreased violence following Kony’s indictment by the International Criminal Court in 2005 (2012). Such critiques extend a longstanding tradition of feminists in the Global South questioning both the right and the ability of activists in the Global North to act on their behalf.

Those critiques also raise relevant questions about criticisms of Bring Back Our Girls that failed to consider it in a context of racist and colonialist heritage. While media sources regularly compared Bring Back Our Girls to Kony 2012 and predicted international interest would wane at similar speed, this comparison ignored a key difference between the two campaigns: unlike its predecessor, Bring Back Our Girls was a home-grown effort, as Nigerian-born as the young women it sought to locate. Colonialist assumptions, which positioned Uganda as a nation of victims in need of salvation (through military intervention from the North),
shaped Kony 2012 from its inception. Bring Back Our Girls, in contrast, was designed by Nigerian citizens on their own behalf. Furthermore, unlike Kony 2012, which obscured existing interventions in Uganda, Bring Back Our Girls was the outcome of such interventions; the campaign called for international support of indigenous efforts.

Unfortunately, as the campaign spread, its roots and context were increasingly obscured. Participants in the campaign located in the Global North followed familiar patterns, urging celebrities to show their support of the Chibok girls through social media and pressing Northern political powers to intervene on behalf of the students. A retweet from rapper Chris Brown, which included a photograph of Jenabu Baide, a Guinea-Bissau youth mistakenly associated with the campaign, quickly drew over ten thousand re-posts (Colleen Curry 2014; Colleen Shalby 2014). Northerners thus transformed a young woman without connection to the abducted—or even to their country of origin—into a literal poster child for the cause.

As political science scholar Meredith Loken notes in her 2014 contribution to this journal, the unauthorized use of Baide’s image “demonstrates the colonial gaze, enabling the claiming of unidentified African women as indispensably ours while also constituting them as interchangeable others” (2014, 1101).

Likewise, media in the Global North replaced Abdullahi and Ezekwesili, the Nigerian originators of the campaign, with Los Angeles film director, Ramaa Moseley. Both ABC News and CNN aired interviews with Moseley, whom they unduly credited with creating the hashtag. Indeed, Moseley initially positioned herself as creator, explaining that she felt compelled to draw attention to the mass abduction, given that “people were not talking about it” except for “a few people, who […] are Nigerian” (Charing Ball 2014). Such statements represented Nigerian citizens as irrelevant to a campaign started by—and on behalf of—Nigerians. In the imaginary of the Global North, any brown face could function as the campaign’s poster-child, but none could stand as its figurehead.

Such maneuvers ignored not only the past exploitation of Nigeria by its colonizers but the ongoing insistence from Nigerian and diasporic activists that such efforts were harmful. Compare Afrique founder Jumoke Balogun warned Northerners that their “insistence on urging American power, specifically American military power, to address this issue [would] ultimately hurt the people of Nigeria” (2014). Balogun explicitly tied such suggestions to the historical and contemporary exploitation of Africans, informing US feminists that their use of the hashtag encouraged that nation’s armed forces to “encroach and grow their military presence in Africa” (2014). Sadly, such critiques had minimal measurable effect. In May 2014, the US Department of Defense deployed eighty military personnel to nearby Chad, to assist in locating and returning the missing Chibok students (Cheryl Pellerin 2014).

The split between activists seeking international support for domestic Nigerian efforts and those pushing for Northern military intervention highlighted the ongoing presence of colonial frameworks in outsiders’ consideration of the Nigerian citizens. As with Kony 2012, not only the young women abducted but also the broader population of the nation were framed as victims, in need of external intervention. Indeed, the “viral” popularity of the campaign—like the popularity of Kony 2012—may well have depended upon the ease with which White Northern feminists could fit the Chibok students into an existing narrative of helpless African girls, in need of protection (by White imperial powers) against dangerous, violent African men. As post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak notes, the narrative of White Northern Samaritans “saving brown women from brown men” extends from the earliest days of the colonial and feminist projects (1988, 93). The fact that the Chibok students were
teenagers, not young children, was quickly obscured through the use of the term “girls.” The Global North metaphorically adopted them and their cause, largely refusing to problematize the use of “our” in the hashtag or to question their right—as outsiders—to claim the Chibok students as their own.

American Studies scholar Corinne Mary Wohlford analyzes a similar dynamic in the portrayal of Haitians, following the 2010 earthquake (2015). Wohlford argues that, in the media surrounding the disaster, “Haitian’ [became] nearly synonymous with ‘orphan’—or, at the least, with families that [were] broken and displaced” (67). As a result, “the care that [outsiders were] encouraged to provide [was] in effect care for children by parents” (67). Similarly, as Nigeria became linked by the discourse in the Global North and by images—such as that of Baide—to the notion of young girls in need, the hashtag became layered with new paternalistic meanings. The Chibok students became “our girls,” considered not simply through a familial lens—as sisters, perhaps—but through a parental one, regardless of the national origin, age, or parental status of those posting the call.

Among Nigerian and diasporic supporters, however, the situation retained more complexity. Thus, a distinction must be drawn between these iterations of the campaign and their resignification within the White Northern context. The Nigerian and diasporic activists routinely referred to the strength of the Nigerian people and the necessity of their ongoing commitment on behalf of the missing girls. In particular, Nigerian activists pressed their fellow citizens and supporters to insist that the Nigerian government, including the nation’s military, take action to rescue the missing students. Unlike the version of Bring Back Our Girls spread by White users in the Global North, the Nigerian focus remained local and included significant outrage toward the Goodluck Jonathon administration, which it viewed as both “deceitful” and “inept” (Obiageli Ezekwesili 2014a). On Twitter, Obiageli Ezekwesili routinely addressed the federal government, which she urged to “[live] up to its responsibility” (2014f) and “just do [its] work” (2014g). Outraged at the government’s decision, in June 2014, to ban Bring Back Our Girls protests in Nigeria’s capital, rather than locate and return the missing girls, Obiageli Ezekwesili pushed Nigerians not to “join the conspiracy of silence” (2014d). “Even when Government fails our fellow Citizens,” she wrote, “WE must NOT FAIL THEM” (Obiageli Ezekwesili 2014c). In an interview with BBC Africa in early December, Ezekwesili again refused to mince words: “There is someone to hold accountable, and that someone is the president of our country” (2014a).

Nigerian protests against the government also focused on the military’s failures. Some activists suggested corruption had left the country’s armed forces ill-equipped to defend citizens against Boko Haram. Chika Oduah, an independent journalist in Nigeria, suggested in an interview with Root TV that “a lot of the money directed to Nigerian defense [had] been channeled to the powers that be” (2014). As a result, reports of military involvement ranged from negligence to criminality. Oduah cited “reports of Nigerian troops running away from Boko Haram when they see them, […] of Nigerian troops knowing in advance that an attack is coming” and fleeing beforehand, and “of Nigerian troops committing human rights abuses against civilians in the name of fighting Boko Haram” (2014). Overall, such reports were creating “a distrust of the Nigerian military,” a sense of “skepticism” and “jadedness” that made it difficult to mirror the hope and optimism expressed by many Americans (2014).

These critiques had less in common with the rhetoric employed by White feminists in the Global North and more with that used in the “Black Lives Matter” movement developing in the United States. Although the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag only gained significant momentum
following the murder of Michael Brown in August 2014, the movements’ founders—Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors, and Alicia Garza—first began circulating the term in 2012 (Alicia Garza 2014). Within a month of the Chibok abductions, a handful of posts explicitly linked the two causes. None of these tweets, however, came from Nigerian users. Instead, they originated almost exclusively in the United States, including solidarity protests in Washington, DC (DCDivas28 2014) and obscured locations such as “Best Place in America” (3ChicsPolitico 2014). In at least one case, a tweet originating from a Nigerian user was modified by a user in the US to incorporate the #BlacklivesMatter tag (Anthony Bridgeforth 2014). Such examples suggest that, even at the inception of the Black Lives Matter movement, some American users viewed the abductions through a transnational lens of violence against Black bodies.

This perspective aligns with that proffered by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991a), which defines “Third World” women “through geographical location as well as particular sociohistorical conjunctures” and “thus incorporates so-called minority peoples or people of color in the USA” (2). For Mohanty, “In the postindustrial world, systemic socioeconomic and ideological processes position the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, as well as ‘minority’ populations (people of color) in the United States and Europe, in similar relationships to the state” (2). Thus, for some Bring Back Our Girls participants, this relationship—inscribed, in the context of the United States, upon Black bodies and Black lives—served as a foundation for solidarity and support of the young women of Chibok. That support, however, was alternately reciprocated and rejected within Nigeria. In June 2015, Nigerian user Steavihn Uzochukwu charged, “Don’t misunderstand me. I feel the struggle because I’m black and #BlacklivesMatter but we are still singing #BringBackOurGirls” (2015). For Uzochukwu and others, the collective ‘we’ primarily signaled Nigerian—not simply Black—identity.

Still, the indigenous campaign and the Black Lives Matter movement shared more complex characterizations of Black and African lives and more actively critiqued the national and international contexts in which those lives were threatened. Such critiques of government and military were notably lacking from the White Northern framework, which focused primarily on the involvement of United States and British leaders, at times urging collaboration with the Jonathon administration, at times pushing for intervention that ignored the existence of any such administration. In spite of this, many Nigerian activists appreciated the attention that support of the hashtag brought to the missing Chibok girls. Oduah suggests that, among the “Nigerian public, there was a sigh of relief to hear that the likes of the United Kingdom, the United States, France and China were offering assistance” (2014). This relief correlated strongly with the lack of faith in the government. Not expecting the administration to take action on their behalf, Nigerians hoped external resources—and the pressure of the public eye—would push those in power to locate the missing students and protect the citizens who remained.

This difference points to a larger distinction in the local and international versions of the campaign. Unlike their Northern supporters, the Nigerian activists conceived of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign in the context of an ongoing timeline, expressing disillusionment at the failure of the Jonathon administration to protect the people of northeastern Nigeria against Boko Haram, since the latter’s insurgency began in 2009. On Twitter, Obiageli Ezekwesili connected the loss to previous Boko Haram attacks, tying the nation’s current concern to its continuing grief over “all the students/children who died due to insurgency” (2014b). She noted a school bombing in Buni Yadi, paralleling the hashtag “#ChibokGirls”—a
precursor to #BringBackOurGirls that remained popular among Nigerian activists—with “#BuniYadiBoys,” further underlining the link between the two tragedies (2014b).

Such connections to previous losses highlighted the baseline distrust Nigerians felt toward the government. Given the failure of the Jonathan administration to protect citizens in the five years of the insurgency prior to the Chibok abductions, local activists struggled to muster even “a very careful optimism” (Oduah 2014) about the fates of the schoolgirls. An infographic released through the Bring Back Our Girls Facebook and Twitter accounts points to thirteen deceits and failures of the government in the six months following the abduction, including a false rescue claim in mid-April and an unfounded report, in October 2014, of the girls’ negotiated, imminent return (“#BringBackOurGirls False Narratives” 2014). “Often times, the Western world will [hear reports of government action and] think ‘oh, maybe this will work,’” Oduah noted, “but we [in Nigeria] have been fooled time and time again” (2014).

This layer of distrust made optimism difficult for Nigerian activists, but it did not sway their commitment to the cause. As the campaign faded from the international radar, Nigerian feminists including Ezekwesili remained committed to the movement. In October, months after the Northern media had declared the campaign “forgotten” (Dan Hodges 2014; Benjamin Radford 2014), activists in Nigeria still met regularly to plan actions on behalf of the missing girls, including a Global Week of Action between October 11 and 18 (Ogene 2014) and a campaign for “43 Days of Multinational Rescue” the following spring, intended to hold the government accountable to a publicized six-week rescue timeline (Bring Back Our Girls NG 2014). Following reports that the Chadian government had played a role in the false ceasefire announcement, a group of protestors marched to the Chadian embassy to demand information (“#BringBackOurGirls Takes …” 2014). Victor Ibrahim Garba, one protest leader, remained among those committed months after the attacks: “Whatever it takes, however long it takes, we are pleading for more voices,” said Garba in an October 2014 interview.

We are here every day under the sun and in the rain for others in our community and around the world to see that we are here. We will not stop until the girls are back even if it takes 100 years, even if it is just one person that remains standing. (Quoted in Ogene 2014)

Garba’s commitment to continue protesting expressed itself in his statement, “We are still here” (quoted in Ogene 2014). That single adverb “still” alluded to the differences between the Nigerian timeline and that at work for White feminists in the Global North. Garba and other local activists were “still” focused on the Chibok girls months’ later—despite the government’s silence, despite the waning interest of the Global North—because the girls were still missing. Essentially, while optimism was, from the initial abduction, more difficult for those directly connected to Nigeria than for those in the Global North, cynicism did not translate to burnout or abandonment of the cause.

On the contrary, Nigerian activists continued to conceive their action as part of a longer timeline, one that began before the abductions and would extend long after them, even if—as everyone hoped—the girls were quickly returned. Activists thus resisted “quick fixes” (Spectra Speaks 2014) in favor of the longer view. Nigerian American blogger Spectra Speaks urged supporters to “broaden [the] conversation from just returning girls” and begin conceiving ways for “returning them to better lives” (Spectra Speaks 2014). Spectra was among many activists who noted that the abducted girls, while living through an unimaginable ordeal, had been in a privileged position among Nigerian female youth. Noting the impossible rarity of girls receiving education in Northern Nigeria (where only 4 percent of young women
finish secondary school), Spectra wrote, “I can’t imagine what those girls are going through in captivity. But I dare us to imagine what it’s like when they’re not” (Spectra Speaks 2014).

Like others who connected the Chibok abduction to social challenges throughout Nigeria—including ongoing insurgent violence, economic struggle, and government corruption—Spectra simultaneously advocated for the Chibok girls, specifically, and for Nigeria at large. She built on “Bring Back Our Girls” with the hashtag “#MakeThingsBetterForAllGirlsPeriod” (Spectra Speaks 2014). Obiageli Ezekwesili, likewise, challenged the government to return the girls and “#SecureTheNortheastZoneAndPeople” (2014e). Understanding the context that had made the Chibok atrocities possible, these activists fought for wider reforms. Spectra challenged feminists to question their tendency to erase girls’ issues in favor of a focus on (adult) women and suggested the Global North’s investment in “rescue” paralleled “media sensationalism around Nigeria’s anti-LGBT bill” (Spectra Speaks 2014). Obiageli Ezekwesili insisted on government transparency and the importance of rebuilding Nigeria’s economy (2014h, 2014i), in addition to returning the missing students. Although dedicated to promoting the cause through social media, when hashtags failed to bring immediate results, Spectra, Ezekwesili, and others like them remained committed. If Bring Back Our Girls had, like Kony 2012, fizzled following its fifteen minutes of international fame, the activists at its heart nevertheless refused to be deterred. Having hoped for quick results, but never expected them, they remained dedicated long after the “trend” expired.

Although heterogeneity existed on either side of the racial and national divides, the majority of Nigerian and diasporic activists framed the Bring Back Our Girls campaign differently than the majority of White activists in the Global North, and thus, committed to it with different expectations, on different timelines. As of this essay, neither approach has successfully met the campaign’s primary goal of restoring the schoolgirls to their homes in Chibok. In spite of this failure, the two versions of the campaign should not be equivocated. Their differences warrant consideration. The White, Northern world adopted and abandoned “Bring Back Our Girls” with equal readiness, and both this support and its eventual expiration depended on the centering of imperial narratives about the Global South. Essentially, these accounts largely excised Nigerian activists from their coverage, and failed to delve into the complexity of the power dynamics within the country. Rather than locating the Chibok abductions in a larger context of Boko Haram’s violence, many activists in the Global North reverted to a more familiar imperialist timeline, which considers Africans less evolved versions of Northerners (Mohanty 1991b, 56). Such characterizations justify external interventions, which rarely benefit those they seek to assist. Although Nigerians attempted to complicate that narrative and to question the Northern push to increase non-Nigerian military presence, their requests were largely ignored. When the campaign failed to produce quick results, supporters wandered to new causes. They filmed ice bucket challenges for Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and shared suicide prevention tips, following the death of actor Robin Williams. By and large, they had offered their support based on a simplified story, and—when they failed to receive an equally simple solution—they could not sustain their commitment.

Ultimately, the key difference between the version of Bring Back Our Girls orchestrated by activists in Nigeria and its diaspora and the version that “went viral” in the Global North is not one of nation. The difference is that, among those connected to Nigeria, the Chibok girls were individuals, young people with names, families, and futures, tied to a known community. Among the Northern participants, the Chibok students were symbols, a contemporary
recreation of an old picture—the poor African, the oppressed woman of color. The correct response to the symbol, according to colonial practice, was pity and military intervention. The request from other African women—that those in the Global North stop speaking for the people of Nigeria—largely went unheard in 2014, as it had centuries earlier. The abduction of the Chibok girls gained fleeting attention while the event remained within a familiar narrative. When that narrative was challenged and the ordeal dragged on, those with the privilege to forget did so. Those for whom the girls were real remained.

This is not to say that all “Northern” supporters participated in this version of the campaign, nor that those who did consciously dehumanized or abandoned the girls of Chibok. Supporters may very well have felt a human connection to the Chibok community, as they endured such egregious violence, and desired somehow to protect these girls—as they would any youth—against further harm. Unfortunately, such intentions cannot transcend the legacy of colonialism, which continues to operate in transnational interactions, at both the psychic and social levels. The presumptions of colonialism, and the racism embedded in it, remain active in the “common sense” practices of the Global North, including the seemingly altruistic desire to act on behalf of African girls. Thus, the insights of feminists of color and feminists in the Global South must be brought to bear on this contemporary case. Mohanty’s assertion, for instance, that “objectification (however benevolently motivated) needs to be both named and challenged” (Mohanty 1991b, 57) speaks directly to the importance of combating the colonial legacy even in one’s seemingly altruistic impulses. It places “slacktivism” in a historical context that calls into question not simply the usefulness of a mouse-click for the common good, but—more importantly—the limitations of any political action that primarily works to improve the self-esteem of the activist. This critique also calls to mind bell hooks’ appraisal of earlier White feminists, specifically her contention that “they could not see that their generosity was directed at themselves, that it was self-centered and motivated by their own opportunistic desires” (1999, 383). In other words, good feelings, like common sense, can disguise powerfully dangerous motives, which—left unchecked—often have disheartening and disastrous results.

Such critiques also challenge the rendering of colonialism to a discrete “past,” instead recognizing its patterns in contemporary flows of power. In this context, the appropriation of “Bring Back Our Girls” by White feminists in the Global North suggests not simply a reiteration of earlier colonial patterns, but an act of colonialization as it continues in the contemporary era. Seemingly altruistic attempts to amplify the voices of an Other in need work, in fact, to amplify the voices of those most removed from that experience, at the expense of those geographically and experientially aligned with the young women in Chibok. Further examining these threads and their implications may well illuminate some of the possibilities and pitfalls of contemporary activism, which—unlike slacktivism—are specific to the Web.

In the meantime, scholars and activists alike must continue to question what options—if any—remain for support. Is there a place for transnational feminism, for working across national borders? The women behind Bring Back Our Girls believe so, expressing gratitude for international support, even as they challenge the shape of that solidarity. Earlier feminist theorists, including bell hooks, also demand a more nuanced solution than desertion of a shared cause. “Racism is the barrier that prevents positive communication,” writes hooks, “and it is not eliminated or challenged by separation” (1999, 385). Instead, hooks calls for “political solidarity” (385), which she defines not as nominal sisterhood, but as an active practice, through which feminists “assume responsibility for eliminating all the forces that
divide women” (385). Mohanty agrees, pushing for “political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance” and insisting that “women of all colors (including white women) can align themselves with and participate” in these partnerships (1991a, 4). Ware also forwards an “optimistic” belief in the possibility of developing networks and alliances that cut across “race, class and gender” and suggests that “white women can potentially open up new avenues of political strategy and alliance by refusing racist definitions of white femininity” (1992, 253). Thus, in a project like Bring Back Our Girls, the role of White feminists in the Global North may rest as much on dismantling the White savior industrial complex and the misrepresentation of women in the Global South as on amplifying the voices of those women.

Such actions require self-reflexivity, as well as critical and historical awareness. As human rights scholar Charlotte Bunch suggests:

For women in industrialized countries, this connectedness must be based in the authenticity of our struggles at home, in our need to learn from others, and in our efforts to understand the global implications of our actions, not in liberal guilt, condescending charity, or the false imposition of our models on others. (1987, 304)

Ultimately, feminists cannot rely simply on our desire to do the right thing; we must listen to those we have harmed and unlearn old patterns, so that we might do those right things for the right reasons and in the right ways.

More than a year has passed since the Chibok students were abducted by Boko Haram, an organization whose name translates to “Western Education is Evil” or, alternatively, “Western influence is a sin.” To conceptualize and put into practice a feminist framework that can resist such crimes, we in the “West” must do more than fail to be evil. We must listen to those we have harmed and amplify their voices as opposed to our own. We must follow the lead of populations we have defined ourselves against. Only then can we manage both to “bring back” what is lost and to move forward, toward something new.

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