

ISSUE NO. 6

The Voice on the Line: A Reflection on Creating the Feminist Phone Intervention

Feminist Phone Intervention

In early June 2014, a friend and I set up the Feminist Phone Intervention, announcing it with this statement:

next time someone demands your digits and you want to get out of the situation, you can give them this number: (669) 221-6251.

when the person calls, an automatically-generated quotation from feminist writer bell hooks will respond for you.

protect your privacy while dropping some feminist knowledge when your unwanted “suitor” calls or texts.

* * * * *

because we're raised to know it's safer to give a fake phone number than to directly reject an aggressive guy.

because we're raised to know that evasion or rejection can be met with violence.

because women are still threatened and punished for rejecting advances.

because (669) UGH-ASIF, WTF-DUDE, and MAJR-SHADE were taken.

because why give any old fake number, when you can have bell hooks screen your calls?

so next time, just give out this number: (669) 221-6251

tech to protect.

Feminist Phone Intervention website (<http://feminist-phone-intervention.tumblr.com>)

The idea for the Feminist Phone Intervention came to me after Elliot Rodgers' shootings in Santa Barbara, California. Our rage was stoked by reading about the murders in

newspapers which often expressed sympathy for Rodgers, portraying him as a spurned lover. It was in this moment of grief and disgust at the violent, racialized sexism saturating our culture that my collaborator and I set up the phone line. We were exhausted by harassment and its attendant mental calculations, the constant consideration of how to let strangers down gently in order to minimize harm to ourselves. We hoped that the Feminist Phone Intervention would provide an accessible technology to block some kinds of harassment from strangers (which, unfortunately, is only one of many forms that abuse can take). Ideally, the project would outsource the labor of explaining and defending one's rights after a dicey situation, while preserving one's privacy. To make the service as accessible as possible, we chose to set up a phone line rather than an app, since centering the technology on smart phones can reify class boundaries.

Because experiences of harassment vary by culture and region, we felt that the phone line must be adaptable to different area codes. This is an ongoing process: we try to grant people's requests for a phone line in their area code, and have added several lines in places where the cost per call would remain below two cents. That, of course, is dependent on local infrastructure: server rates are affected by economic disparities, for example, the 42-cent difference between a call placed in Tel Aviv and the West Bank. We reached out during its first few days to friends who are Inuit activists, who hope to add a line in an Inuit language. We are also working to add lines in Spanish for Mexico, which will feature quotations by Gloria Anzaldua, and Kenya, using subversive proverbs. My collaborator, who works as a tech educator, has set up a step-by-step explanation for creating one's own Feminist Phone Intervention, so it can be easily adapted by activists using different "digital dialects." Would bell hooks's work resonate with feminists in, say, Tunisia? We don't know, so we left it open for others to use their own texts or methods.

Feminist Phone Intervention repository (<https://github.com/feminista/feminist-phone-intervention>) on Github

Activists in Germany set up their own line with quotations from Rosa Luxembourgn and Simone de Beauvoir.

German Feminist Phone site (<http://telefeministinnen.tumblr.com>) inspired by Feminist Phone Intervention

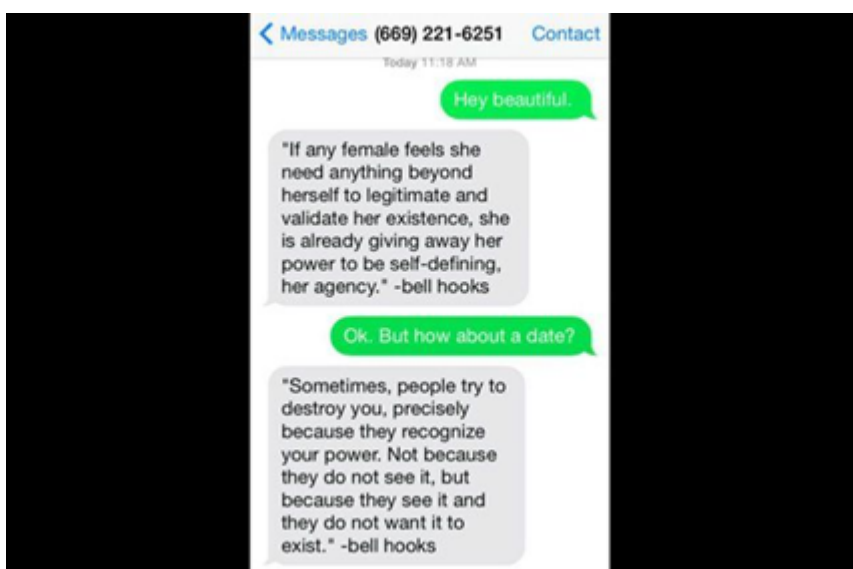
German feminists also translated bell hooks:

“Wo auch immer es Herrschaft gibt, fehlt es an Empathie.”

“Wherever there is power, there is a lack of empathy.”

For such a modest idea, the bell hooks line became astonishingly popular around the world. Since its creation in June, the bell hooks line has received about 50,000 calls; in the first week, it received 109,997 texts. It has been circulated hundreds of thousands of times online, and a friend counted more than 50 news pieces on the subject. It was featured in *Time*, *Forbes*, the *Huffington Post*, *Bitch*, the *Forward*, *ColorLines*, and several international newspapers and radio programs. We watched as our project, with its origins in anarchy-feminist activism, spread via mainstream news, which rarely engaged the *content* of bell hooks’ own quotations that drive the project. The ensuing media coverage illustrated for us the delicate balance between the agit-prop impulses of users and the overwhelming demand to develop a practical intervention for everyday harassment.

Initially, the Feminist Phone Intervention featured texts which were randomly generated, to simulate actually having an SMS conversation with “bell hooks.” This led to some delightful graphics:



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2-1.png>)

(Screen shot of a sample SMS conversation with the bell-bot)

However, we were concerned about the immediacy of the SMS option: since people commonly send a text during conversation to share their number, we tried to delay the responding text for several minutes later, allowing time for a person to leave the scene, if necessary. Yet it seemed impossible to predict or manage the time delay as a safety precaution, while diminishing its effectiveness as digital art for people who enjoyed interacting via text with the “bell-bot.” The challenge of the project stemmed from tempering its communicative art in the digital realm with its impact in the street.

Digital art responding to racialized harassment

Recently, the anti-street harassment organization Hollaback released an edited video of a white woman walking through the streets of New York City for ten hours. Her presence on the sidewalk was met by unrelenting catcalls and comments, mostly from Black and Latino men. She does not respond to any of the men, but continues walking, looking increasingly worried. No white men are depicted as harassers, and the video editor later admitted that they were cut for video-graphical reasons. Many excellent responses to Hollaback’s video were written, both affirming its importance as documentation of harassment and critiquing the erasure of white male harassers.

A Hollaback Response Video: Women of Color on Street Harassment posting

(<http://jezebel.com/a-hollaback-response-video-women-of-color-on-street-ha-1655494647>) by Collier Meyerson

In a recent Ebony article, Tiq Milan writes:

I found myself in several heated exchanges online with misogynist knuckleheads about the catcalling video that went viral last month (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A>). The video shows a young White woman walking down 125th St. in Harlem and around Port Authority in midtown Manhattan being bombarded by a barrage of hello’s and unwanted compliments. A young Black woman on the thread said “I wish someone would call me beautiful instead of, ‘damn you got a fat ass’ or ‘let me fuck’ while walking down the street.” While this young lady was disagreeing that the woman in the video was indeed harassed, she inadvertently pointed to the fact that the misogyny and entitlement that is hurled at Black women is often more violent and antagonizing.

Black Girls Only article (<http://www.ebony.com/news-views/black-girls-only-503#ixzz3JzgHFxSr>) by Tiq Milan with Ebony Magazine

Milan then describes some of the violent harassment suffered by his wife, who is femme and Trinidadian. He writes, “This happens because culturally there is a universal lack of empathy towards Black women rendering her pain invisible and struggle self-imposed.”

These and many other insightful responses to Hollaback’s video addressed the ways in which street harassment is profoundly racialized. As these videos illustrated, the discourse of safety privileges the comfort of some women over others. Whose bodies are considered “worthy” of police protection, and who is targeted by harassment from police themselves? My particular experience as a femme, Latina Jewish woman illustrates this: the common catcall, “Hey baby, what are you?” epitomizes the twinning of racial and sexual fascination directed at people with “ambiguous” appearances. The lived experience of racialized harassment, repeated ad infinitum in different cities and neighborhoods, make one hyper-conscious of living in the interstices of others’ categories. Men’s demonstrated entitlement to seek information about my ethnicity and to encroach on my physical space have defined my experience of harassment. The cumulative force of their behavior can narrow one’s felt sense of self when moving through a city, as Barbara Kruger’s famous poster succinctly declares:



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2-2.png>)

(Above: Barbara Kruger, “Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face”)

In my particular experience of racial scrutiny, men have craned their necks to “check my nose” in profile, deciding for themselves whether it met their stereotyped standard of Jewish physiognomy. At other times, I experienced harassment from Hasidic men who read me as “exotic” and thus non-Jewish— and were shocked, satisfyingly, when I responded to their overtures in Yiddish. I remember returning home after one such incident as a teenager, and seeing my own face in the mirror through the scrim of racial anxiety projected onto it by strangers. In these ways, racial harassment can cause alienation from one’s own body, just as sexual harassment often causes feelings of

disassociation and disembodiment. The racialization of sexual harassment *is* the sexualization of racial scrutiny: in my experience these cannot be separated, and they cannot be ignored. The “irreconciliability” of my ethnic identity was brought to the fore in discussions around the phone line: one reporter repeatedly assumed that the creators of the phone line were white, and another reader wrote to the editor multiple times, having noticed that in one article I discuss my experience as Latina and in another, I discussed Yiddish anarchist media. The reader wanted to know which newspaper had made a mistake! In both the project itself and its discussion, it has been complex to represent a non-binary subject position while discussing how race shapes women’s experiences of harassment.

Because of the severity of racialized harassment, we found it important to choose a Black feminist’s words to be what answers back. To have a tool like the Feminist Phone Intervention that addresses any harasser, regardless of his race, in the “voice” of a brilliant Black feminist writer, disrupts the racial binary of innocent-white-woman and fearsome-brown-men portrayed in the Hollaback video. Adrienne Maree Brown, in her discussion of our project, emphasizes how race affects the need for a technology that mediates harassment:

... generally i want to approach other humans as humans, and lonely humans as lonely humans. and men, particularly black men, i approach as my brothers, my family. but there need to be tools for humans who treat me like property and/or make me feel unsafe. and i need it to not be my responsibility to risk my safety for the teachable moment. i need something in between a self-defense chop, screaming, and submissive kindness or avoidance. i need this number.

(669)221-6251 bell hooks feminist awesomeness blog post

(<http://adriennemareebrown.net/blog/2014/06/16/669-221-6251-bell-hooks-feminist-awesomeness/>) by

Adrienne Maree

Brown’s spiritual nonviolence is grounded in acknowledging the loneliness and pain that often lies behind sexist aggression, while absolutely prioritizing her own space, safety and privacy. The cumulative experience of harassment can only be expressed in its complexity by literary language, as in Brown’s piece, which maps the effect of street oppression on her as an individual. Cultivating spiritual nonviolence in one’s own psyche is a profound form of resistance that does not fit readily into pre-existing political discourse, let alone the language of a meme. The Hollaback video is effective because it reveals what is rarely represented on movie screens; we only wish they had

had Hollywood-scale resources to portray diverse women's experiences. Perhaps through more sustained art and literature, we can develop a phenomenology of harassment and invent a more precise vocabulary for these experiences using genres that historically have not included them. Though an immediate intervention into public discourse, the meme-able genres of the intervention, viral video, and manifesto can lose complexity with the speed of their circulation. We were moved that Brown considered the phone line one modest, communicative tool towards achieving the balance of solidarity and self-preservation. We hope that a proliferation of activist methods will be invented, expanding our political creativity. Closely linked to this is the hope that complex narratives by people of many backgrounds will come to be expressed in full.

Anonymity as feminist tactic

Of the many interview requests we received, the most frequently-asked question was "Why are you anonymous?" One news reporter's leading questions insinuated that our anonymity was primarily a veil of safety between me and the "notably vicious" public reactions to feminism, rather than a reasoned activist strategy. Another reporter from ABC contacted us not to discuss the project, but to request that I reveal my identity and "personal reasons" for creating it. This framing sensationalizes the project and seeks to reduce it to the product of a single, victimized woman. The irony of media demanding to broadcast the identity of a woman who had set up a cyber-feminist project dedicated to protecting women's privacy was completely lost.

We remain anonymous because this project is dedicated to asserting one's boundaries, about rejecting the idea that we owe our names, our time, or our bodies to anyone else. "bell hooks" is itself a pseudonym that places attention on the "substance of books, not who I am," and a tribute to the writer's grandmother. Anonymity, however, is an individual stance, which functions somewhat differently. There's a long tradition of using anonymity in feminist movements, as a way to prevent the media from choosing a leader and erasing the real collectivity of the movement.

The phone line is designed to be reinvented by people in different regions speaking different languages, and having a single face attached to it could limit its mutability. In an article for *Radical Philosophy* about the Russian agit-prop punk band Pussy Riot, **Maria Chehonadskih** (<http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/author/maria-chehonadskih>) asks, "What is authorship in digital activism?" Her friend responds: "Authorship means to make something work." In the case of the phone line project, then, those who reinvent it in

their daily lives or via open-source code for their own purposes can be its authors, and that sense of ownership by its users is facilitated by our anonymity.

What is Pussy Riot's 'Idea'? commentary (<http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/what-is-pussy-riots-idea>) by Maria Chehonadskih

In the examples above, however, the women who chose anonymity are all white, and this is not accidental. The refusal of claiming authorship of one's art is a luxury which many women of color historically have not had, as their work has been appropriated and their identities erased regardless of their by-line. In the documentary *20 Feet from Stardom*, masterful singers reflect on their long careers as performing as backup in support of white rock stars, who themselves often appropriated Black art forms such as the blues. The film resonates also as metaphor: the art of Black women singers becomes ubiquitous on the radio, where their disembodied voices can be passed off as others' music, as their own careers are curtailed and their names unattributed. Other singers in that documentary describe acts of cultural resistance from within the space of singing backup, such as the chorus of "Sweet Home Alabama," where the Black woman's voice soaring through the chorus subverts the white male singers' main verses. That kind of interruption from the "sidelines," from the backup singers and the chorus, resonates as a model of complex cultural intervention that grants (circumscribed) power in the tension between anonymity and ubiquity. We are hopeful for the mass engagement with the project that our anonymity might make possible, while we appreciate that our anonymity is the chosen kind of namelessness.

Anonymity supports the ideal of comradeship, a word not used as frequently as "allyship" these days, but a word with a long history in labor movements. I see comradeship as a commitment to being with others within and beyond the bounds of activist communities, a way of being-together not built on easy or unearned intimacy or developing simply from commonalities of race or gender. As the Jewish and Puerto Rican feminist Aurora Levins Morales writes, "This tribe called 'Women of Color' is not an ethnicity. It is one of the inventions of solidarity, an alliance, a political necessity that is not the given name of every female with dark skin and a colonized tongue, but rather a choice about how to resist and with whom." Two phrases in that passage are key for me: "the invention of solidarity" and "a choice about how to resist and with whom." It affirms that solidarity can and must be invented, worked for, and not taken for granted; and it offers an expansive idea of being together and being for each other in everyday life. My ideal feminist intervention, then, would be designed to take place within the

realm of the everyday. When someone uses the bell hooks line for oneself, she shares in this common act; she knows that thousands of others have also used it, creating an imagined community of fellow feminists who are all using it to speak back, individually, but within a kind of diffuse community. In the recent book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, danah boyd argues that after the collapse of a public commons available to young people, teens turned to the internet as a replacement. If parents want their kids to spend less time online, a public social commons will need to be created again. This project offers digital activism as an intervention into public space, akin to murals. And as in street art, the anonymity of the artist is often an invitation to others to engage and add new pieces.

How a Meme Moves

Watching an elegantly coiffed reporter on the *Huffington Post* slowly read aloud the manifesto that I had written two days earlier was a surreal experience. Our words were literally read back to me in a new, mass format, and with real sympathy.

bell hooks Develops New Feminist Phone Intervention Hotline

HuffPost Live

Posted: 06/14/2014 10:37 am EDT | Updated: 4 hours ago



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2-3.png>)

Feminist blogger bell hooks never wants another girl to feel pressured to give their phone number out again.

For that reason, she's developed her own rejection hotline: (669) 221-6251. When an unwanted suitor texts that number, they'll receive an automated feminist quote from the blogger herself -- protecting the lady's privacy, and sending the guy the message all at once.

Watch the clip above to find out more Bell Hooks' new feminist phone intervention hotline.

MORE: [Combating Female Sexual Assault, Video, Bell Hooks Phone Line, Rejecting Guys, Rejection Hotline, HuffPost Live, Bell Hooks Phone Intervention Hotline, Feminist Rejection Hotline, Bell Hooks](#)

[Suggest a correction](#)

(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2-4.png>)

Yet we worried that the proliferation of jocular articles could deflect judgment away from aggressors and onto how a person chooses to respond. Unsurprisingly, many commenters called those who give out a fake number cowardly, immature, and many vile names as well. Only within a culture that values women's "virtue" above our safety could lying about one's phone number be considered a worse character flaw than stalking. We were also aware that a single project — even one with mass participation — cannot take on the dynamics of abuse and interlocking systems of oppression. Along these lines, Harsha Walia offers a thoughtful critique in "The bell hooks Phone Line Bothers Me," writing:

[O]ne of the most ubiquitous myths of rape culture is that sexual assault is perpetuated by shady strangers, distinguishing between "good men in our lives" and "bad men out there in the world." This myth is implicit in the phone line. As feminist poet Cynthia Dewi Oka notes, "Will women be more safe because we find more ways around saying 'No, I don't want to give you my number'? The vast majority of women are assaulted and violated by men already in their lives." And do women really need yet one more — albeit, witty and sassy — means of guarding-up (<http://persephonemagazine.com/2014/06/keys-out-and-guard-up-what-women-do-to-stay-safe/>)? On top of figuring out a buddy system, choosing a route to walk home, and protecting our drinks, do we now need to memorize a phone number to fend off unwanted sexual advances? Why are we, yet again, placing the onus on women to stay safe, rather than focusing on ending date harassment, male entitlement and rape culture? How do we eliminate the social and gendered dynamics that make it so difficult to reject unwanted sexual advances in the first place?

The bell hooks Phone Line Bothers Me column (<http://rabble.ca/columnists/2014/06/bell-hooks-phone-line-bothers-me>) by Harsha Walia

Walia's piece illustrates the activist bind: in a culture that daily curtails freedom of movement in our own streets, is there breathing room to strengthen our own responses to harassment *and* refuse to be blamed for violence against us? While its open-source spirit may have left it open to co-optation as well as adaptation, we hope that the project functioned successfully in many of its 150,000 interactions.

Shortly after the phone line became popularized, I traveled abroad to a city where I hadn't been before. It occurred to me that there was a feminist phone line set up in this area code, which thousands of people had already called. Although I have experienced harassment almost universally in different cities, now I felt an altered sense of kinship to others, wondering how they responded to harassment in their lives and even if the phone intervention had been useful to them. That night, I visited a pub and met a group out celebrating a birthday. Someone brought up the phone line, and to my amazement, seemingly all the women knew about it and excitedly began sharing their own stories and experiences. There, quite far from home, digital activism offered not only a hack against sexism, but the *cultivation* of social solidarity. It was an unexpected moment of the feminist comradeship we dream of finding.

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Feminist Phone Intervention

(<https://adanewmedia.org/author/fpintervention>)

<http://feminist-phone-intervention.tumblr.com/> (<http://feminist-phone-intervention.tumblr.com/>)

ONE THOUGHT ON “THE VOICE ON THE LINE: A REFLECTION ON CREATING THE FEMINIST PHONE INTERVENTION”

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