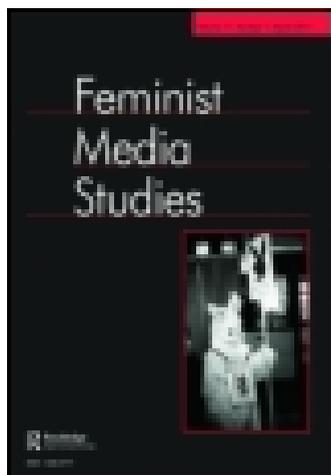


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### #BringBackOurGirls and the Invisibility of Imperialism

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## COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

# #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS AND THE INVISIBILITY OF IMPERIALISM

Meredith Loken, University of Washington

The April 2014 abduction of nearly three hundred girls by the extremist group Boko Haram from a school in Chibok, Boro State, Nigeria prompted an international social media firestorm collected under the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. Originating in Nigeria, the movement has become a rallying cry for politicians, celebrities, and concerned observers alarmed by the violent persecution of women seeking education. While laudable in effort, scope, and reach, #BringBackOurGirls reproduces the problematic narratives of women as rights-deserving only through their capacity to be claimed. In one circulated image, a protest sign reads “#BringBackOurGirls, our sisters and daughters deserve better.” In a Mother’s Day speech, Michelle Obama noted, “In these girls, Barack and I see our own daughters.” This language closely mirrors rights rhetoric in the United States through which we conceptualize women’s needs as valid because “she could be someone’s daughter, sister, friend or mother.” The dualistic construction of women as worthy of political recognition due to their relationship to a more privileged agent works powerfully in the age of hashtag activism through its ability to draw emotional response and impassioned reaction from a non-contiguous and apathetic populous. However, this imagination also risks infantilization and positions women as full political and social actors only through their potential as property.

The enthusiastic Western adoption of #BringBackOurGirls must also be treated skeptically for its failure to consider its own imperial dynamics. The claiming of Nigerian schoolgirls as “our girls” seeks to promote women’s rights in the Global South while paradoxically ignoring the intersections of race, class, and colonialism actively rooting the social media uprising. Writing on the popularly reproduced figure of the “Third World Woman” in Western feminist thought, Chandra Mohanty (1991, 337) notes, “[she] leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc).” #BringBackOurGirls reconstitutes the figure of “Third World Woman” as a person accessible (and therefore less dispensable) to the West by claiming her as *ours*. She becomes *our girl*, contextually indistinguishable and thus deserving protection from her communal struggle-in-kind.

While reconstructing the Third World Woman as our daughter to be claimed, #BringBackOurGirls simultaneously re-entrenches her as homogenous and disposable by

popularly stamping the slogan on unsourced images of black women who serve as social media stand-ins for *our girls*. Mary J. Blige, Chris Brown, The BBC, and thousands of Twitter users shared a viral #BringBackOurGirls photograph featuring an unidentified black woman crying. The woman in the photograph was later identified as Jenabu Balde of Guinea-Bissau, a person unrelated to the kidnappings. This misrepresentation demonstrates the colonial gaze enabling the claiming of unidentified African women as indispensably *ours* while also constituting them as interchangeable *others*. Similarly, Arit John notes in coverage for *The Wire* that Los Angeles filmmaker Ramaa Mosley publicly credits herself for #Bring-BackOurGirls' inception despite its creation by a Nigerian Muslim man. Mosley's claims coincide with the promotion of her documentary about educating women worldwide.

Women need not be *ours* to be politically legitimated. Presented as a nameless unit of evidence in the global struggle for women's emancipation, these girls deserve our international outrage, attention, and assistance because a grave human rights violation has been committed against them. As #BringBackOurGirls demonstrates, hashtag activism is powerful in its ability to synthesize and disseminate information, collect transnational response, and politicize feminist issues in public digital space. As Mikki Kendall, Suey Park, Janet Mock, and other activists have illustrated through #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, #CancelColbert and #girlslikeus, social media offers new space with the potential to reimagine narratives for demanding agency, autonomy, and institutional inclusion. However, hashtag activism poses ethical questions for feminist outreach as we attempt to navigate the need to call attention to feminist issues without reproducing problematic narratives of womanhood. #BringBackOurGirls serves an important purpose in the global struggle for gender equity, but its lack of self-awareness demonstrates how social media activism can unintentionally imitate the problems it ostensibly opposes.

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