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EMOTIONS, CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND FEMINISMS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

On Building Solidarity

GABRIELA SILVA LOUREIRO



Emotions, Consciousness-Raising and Feminisms in the Global South

This book is about the role of emotions in the creation and dissipation of feminist collectives and grapples with difficult questions that have been circulating for a while in activist circles but are far from answered. What are the emotions involved in building and sustaining solidarity? What can we learn from previous “waves” of feminist activism, and what is worth saving in social media activism today?

These questions are tackled via the discourse analysis of hashtagged posts of two popular feminist hashtags in Brazil (#PrimeiroAssédio and #MeuAmigoSecreto) and interviews with Brazilian feminist actors. But instead of merely analysing the content of the hashtags or over-celebrating aesthetics, I interpret them as empirical evidence of the emotional life of varied feminisms and therefore useful to reflect upon historical build-ups and dissipation of solidarity.

The unique feature of the book is making a bridge between sociology of emotions, feminist theory, and decolonial, Black, and Global South literature and praxis that articulate solidarity based on principles of difference instead of sameness. This book will be of interest to students, scholars, teachers, activists, and community members interested in the emotions involved in building and sustaining feminist solidarity from a non-Western perspective.

Gabriela Silva Loureiro is a feminist scholar with a strong synergy between research and teaching. Her main research interests are genders, sexualities, antiracism, decoloniality, and emotions. She currently works as a lecturer in sociology at the University of Wollongong, Australia, having held previous teaching and research positions in the UK. Her recent outputs look at the meaning-making of gender-based violence in Brazil (2023) and the work of Marielle Franco as an embodiment of Black feminist praxis (2020).

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To my grandmother Antonieta Sangoi da Silva, who shared and taught me her generous politics of care.



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Introduction

This book is about the entanglement of emotions, feminist consciousness-raising, and stories – written, published, liked, commented on, and shared on and off social media. It entails critical discourse analysis of Facebook posts with two feminist hashtags that were prominent in the recent “feminist spring” in Brazil and subsequent qualitative interviews with participants who engaged with one or both of the hashtags. However, the focus of the analysis is not on the hashtags but on how online feminist discourses can be seen as a digital form of consciousness-raising. There is sufficient work (Blevins, 2018; Gleeson, 2017; Mendes et al., 2019) showing the interconnectedness of hashtag feminism and the practice of consciousness-raising. Instead, I analyse empirical evidence of the emotional life of hashtag feminism in Brazil in contemporaneity to reflect upon historical build-ups and dissipation of solidarity amongst feminists in different parts of the world. By looking at what led Brazilian feminists to engage, what sort of emotional volition emerged, how reflexivity took place, the role of collective reassurance in the decision to act, the expectation of care and support, and the consequential conflicts that emerged between feminists due to disagreements, I bring essential reflections about conversations that have been taking place for decades amongst politicised communities but have not been systematically empiricised and dissected.

While hashtagged posts can be easily dismissed as aesthetics and therefore superficial and irrelevant to understanding social movement dynamics, I argue that aesthetics and affect are not separated from politics and that aesthetics analysis can inform understanding about political phenomena. Rather than over-celebrating aesthetics and framing feminist hashtags as equal to change or dismissing them as “slacktivism” emptied of political significance, I argue that feminist hashtags and the stories of the individuals engaging with them can offer important insights about how feminist collectives are created and dissolved. In fact, hashtag feminism mirrors several intersecting and conflicting histories of feminisms’ radicalness and co-option. But instead of contemplating hashtags’ value for their viral capacity or considering feminist activism in waves periodisation, I am more interested in the ripples of the in-between, looking at fantasies of unity as failures of imagination where might lie the blockage for building tangible solidarity. And I believe that

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studying the ways in which Brazilian feminists use emotions online can offer an important contribution to tackling the difficulties found in the principles of building political collectives and therefore speak for wider feminist politics of ambivalence and entanglement.

The analysis starts with two hashtags in particular, both of which went viral in Brazil in 2015, namely #PrimeiroAssédio (#FirstHarassment) and #MeuAmigoSecreto (#MySecretFriend). These hashtags received substantial coverage in Brazilian mainstream media and had significant repercussions, including broadcast debates and civic organising that led to a new law regarding sexual harassment in public spaces. The hashtags must be read as part of a broader political context marked by the amplification of feminist visibility in Brazil that led to the naming of 2015 as “the year of Women’s Spring”. The hashtag #PrimeiroAssédio was created by a Brazilian feminist non-profit group called Think Olga, as a reaction to abusive and sexually explicit tweets directed at Valentina Schulz – a 12-year-old contestant on the country’s Junior MasterChef TV show. In response, Think Olga invited women to share their first experiences of harassment. According to the creators, their goal was to use the descriptions of sexual harassment to demonstrate the connection between violent comments and sexual abuse against minors. Five days later, more than 82,000 stories were shared on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms. Later that year, the hashtag was designated one of the reasons why 2015 was the “year of the Women’s Spring” in Brazil by *Época* – a then leading magazine in the country.

The second hashtag under analysis, #MeuAmigoSecreto or #MySecret-Friend, was a campaign created by a feminist collective, called Não Me Kahlo, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25 November 2015). The name of the collective refers to the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, commonly portrayed as a feminist symbol, and the phrase “Não me calo” – which translates to “I do not keep quiet”. The purpose of the hashtag was to encourage participants to tell a story about a “secret male friend” in order to expose everyday acts of sexism, racism, and cis-hetero-sexism without having to mention specific names. The campaign was also set to speak out against violent and toxic behaviours, particularly from people who proclaim or position themselves as allies. According to the collective (Não me Kahlo, 2016), the idea was sparked amidst end-of-the-year conversations on Twitter, mentioning the secret Santa (“amigo secreto”, or “secret friend”) tradition. The first tweets created by the collective with the hashtag exemplify the somewhat diverse character of the hashtag, addressing hypocritical behaviours in relation to discrimination on the basis of gender, sexuality, and race:

My secret friend says that abortion is murder, but when his girlfriend got pregnant he asked her to get an abortion.

My secret friend tells me he is not a homophobe but says that “you can be a fag away from me”.

My secret friend didn't introduce his girlfriend to his family because she is Black.

(Não Me Kahlo, 2016, p. 12)

This initial trend consistently continued throughout the posts under analysis, with complaints about issues such as machismo, transphobia, racism, and homophobia. According to the collective, the goal of the hashtag was to shed light on experiences of machismo in everyday life, via the consideration of people who are part of one's intimate circle, "demystifying the idea that our aggressors are unknown. Actually, they are . . . someone you would give a present to in a secret friend game" (Não Me Kahlo, 2016, p. 13).

Through the discourse analysis of 179 hashtagged Facebook posts and interviews with eight campaign participants, I explore the significance of emotional engagements for feminist projects, looking at emotional reflexivity and embodied processes of recognition as an important basis for feminist subjectivities and for undertaking of feminist action. I also look at the motivations to participate and the forms of narrative used in both hashtags, moving then to the issue of exposing others as a search for justice and how this leads to internal conflicts characteristic of earlier forms of feminist activism, both in Brazil and elsewhere. Finally, I examine these conflicts considering theories of intersectionality and praxis of coalitional politics for reimagining more inclusive forms of feminist activism whilst recognising the challenges and difficulties of these propositions.

Feminist investments as ammunition for conservative politics

The context of Brazilian politics when the hashtags emerged must be considered for a full understanding of the strong will to participate that participants felt, as I argued previously (Loureiro, 2023). From 2013 onwards, Brazil went through a juncture of polarised tensions that prompted many individuals to position themselves more openly as they were confronted by controversial and substantial shifts in politics. The context of the digital feminist mobilisations is crucial to understanding the contribution of the book, given the particularities of political uprisings and their effects on the emotional investments of feminist publics. Siqueira (2020) situates the magnitude of the hashtag #EleNão (#NotHim, a campaign against Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro) as a continuation of the visibility acquired by feminist hashtags in 2015. Almeida (2019) argues that #PrimeiroAssédio contributed to new understandings of sexual harassment as well as the creation of a new law (as will be explained and unpacked in the last part of the book).

In their studies about feminist hashtags in 2015, Reis (2017) and Brito (2017) call attention to the rise of conservative backlashes in Brazilian politics in that year, mainly headed by the figure of Eduardo Cunha, a conservative politician then occupying the role of a leader of Congress. The 2014 elections gave rise to the most conservative formation of the National Congress since

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1964 (Queiroz, 2014), the year of the *coup d'état* that led to 21 years of military dictatorship in Brazil. The new formation of the Congress was marked by the triumph of a coalition known as BBB (bullets, beef, and Bible) – that is, the armed forces, agricultural businesses, and evangelical churches. This new far-right block – which included Jair Bolsonaro, who became president in 2018 – was trying to push legislation against the demarcation of indigenous land, abortion rights, labour rights, gun control, and gay marriage. It also advanced pro-deforestation proposals (Cavalcanti, 2017) and sought to reduce the age of criminal responsibility – a move critics argued would result in the increased incarceration of young Black men.

Cunha, in particular, played a highly visible political role at the time as the leader of the Congress, utilising his position to set forward projects aligned with the BBB caucus, including supposedly fundamental Christian values that restricted women's sexual and reproductive autonomy. Brito (2017) situates the “Women's Spring” – encompassing the hashtags and massive street protests that were happening in October and November 2015 in Brazil – within a more extensive reaction against the law project PL 5069–2013, authored by Cunha that restricted the already highly circumscribed access to abortion that women have in the country.¹ The protest organisers created events on social media to gather participants physically in the streets of different cities of Brazil but particularly on a massive scale in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the largest capitals of the country.

In the weekend prior to the initial protests, violence against women was included as a theme in the national entrance examination for public and private universities in Brazil (Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio, ENEM). The test also had a multiple-choice question about gender, citing Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2015).² This stimulated discussion on the inclusion of gendered violence as part of the curriculum (Costa & Andrade, 2015). The assessment of students' understanding of gender issues on a national scale led to feminist celebrations on social media, with the introduction of the popular hashtags #EnemFeminista (“feminist ENEM”) and #FeminismoEnem (“feminism ENEM”). This apparent validation of the national importance of gendered debates created a sense of hope amongst groups of networked feminists, who used the hashtags as celebrations of feminist achievements.

The celebrations and protests were taking place at the same time that similar projects to PL 5069/2013 were being advanced at city and state levels in different parts of Brazil. Brito (2017) reminds us that PL 5069/2013 was approved by the Justice and Constitution Commission of the House of Commons on the 21 October, the same day that the hashtag #PrimeiroAssédio was popularised on social media. Thousands of people marched against Cunha in the streets in different areas of Brazil, denouncing the “sexist coup” against Dilma Rousseff (the first woman to become president in the country), which was facilitated by Cunha and resulted in her impeachment in 2016. Thus, the themes of sexual violence and reproductive rights that are historically a core part of feminist struggles for women's bodily autonomy (struggles which are

morally condemned by Christian fundamentalism) were highly visible and present in public discussion when the hashtags were created.

Therefore, the spaces of visibility that feminist mobilisations were occupying in Brazil in October and November 2015 were embedded in polarised dynamics: fundamental Christianity versus feminist mobilisations using visibility strategies to challenge one another. One counters the other in varied battlefields, including the Congress, the code of law, the streets, social media, and the press. While feminist organisers count on massive engagement on social media and a considerable level of support in the mainstream press, this visibility is used by their opponents to justify the need to secure “Christian values” before what they present as the emerging threat of progressive political expansion. Luna and Owsiany (2019) note that legislative spaces have become a notorious stage for public and heated debates about moral values, particularly “controversial” themes that challenge the idea of a secular state in Brazil. The moral battlefields involving conservative religion and feminism are not new, and there is a growing body of research particularly about the disputes between religious groups and women’s reproductive rights in Brazil (Gomes, 2009; Luna, 2013, 2015; Luna & Owsiany, 2019; Miguel et al., 2017). So whilst hashtags that “go viral” entail political subjectivities that broad publics can be sympathetic to obscuring difference, this visibility is also used as ammunition by conservatives aiming to restrict social minorities’ rights. Considering the political and religious contexts of Brazil during and in the wake of 2015, issues of reproduction and traditional Christian family values have been at the core of public debates. Feminist groups have occupied a crucial role as enemies of rising conservative figures who rely on visibility to assert their power.

While the intricacies and consequences of the moral debates in Brazilian politics at the time are beyond the scope of the book, the scholarship mentioned above offers relevant insights for the purpose of contextualising the hashtags. The hashtags operate in a context of intense, heated discussion centred on moral values that were used by both feminist and Christian groups to create validation within the public sphere. There was a critical power imbalance in which the Congress was dominated by conservative figures and feminist groups reacted by trying to create instances of agency online and in the streets and asserting the importance of protecting basic rights, such as access to the morning after pill in cases of rape. This particular affective background created a sense of urgency to defend the already-limited legislative resources in place to protect women’s reproductive agency. At the same time, the presence of feminist literature in the national examinations expressed the reach and influence of feminist positions in education, leading to a somewhat ostensible expectation that feminist demands and interpretations were valued and had substantial power to counteract political figures capable of changing legislation and supported by multimillionaire industries of environmental extraction (beef), human annihilation (bullet), and faith (bible).

At the same time that the local political context is important to understand the emotional volition of the hashtags, the visibility of feminist mobilising in