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R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism

Interview R-0883

Emily May

July 7, 2015

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ABSTRACT – Emily May

Interviewee: Emily May
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman
Interview Date: July 7, 2015
Location: Hollaback office in Brooklyn, NY
Length: Approximately 77 minutes

Emily May is a co-founder and director of Hollaback, a movement against street harassment with chapters around the world. In this interview she discusses her childhood ambitions, her divorced mother's influence on her feminist outlook and a pivotal moment volunteering in a food shelter and talking to a homeless man when she was a teenager. This event led to a dedication to working on poverty; she received an undergraduate degree at NYU and a master's in social policy at London School of Economics focusing on anti-poverty policy and methods. After school she worked on workforce development in NYC and four different political campaigns. With several friends she founded Hollaback, and discusses the difficulty they faced in finding funding. A major theme in the interview is the power and the limitations of the internet and social media for social movement building. May believes that academic women's studies programs focus on critique rather than on how to create things contributes directly to the divisive nature of online feminism and she describes her frustration with feminists critiquing each other rather than focusing their ire on those on the Right. She discusses a partnership with Cornell university to do research including on where in the world street harassment is worse or better. She reflects on the importance of Black Lives Matter, and draws comparisons between the feminist movement and anti-poverty movement.

FIELD NOTES – Emily May

(compiled July 7, 2015)

Interviewee: Emily May

Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman

Interview Date: July 7, 2015

Location: Hollaback offices, Brooklyn, NY

THE INTERVIEWEE. Emily May is the founder and director of Hollaback, a movement against street harassment that has chapters around the world.

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel F. Seidman is an historian and associate director of the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place on a hot summer day in Brooklyn, New York, in Hollaback's offices. May, who was pregnant at the time, had a fan directed toward her, which made some noise and interfered at times with the audio. The window was also open, so noises like sirens and cars can also be heard at times. May was relatively guarded in this interview.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded on a digital zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT – Emily May

Interviewee: Emily May

Interviewer: Rachel Seidman

Interview date: July 7th, 2015

Location: Brooklyn, New York

Length: 1 audio file, 76:44

Rachel Seidman: Ok, this is Rachel Seidman. I'm here with Emily May in Brooklyn, New York, July 7th, 2015, and we are undertaking an oral history interview for a project called Speaking Up, Speaking Out, Talking Back: an Oral History of Feminism in the Digital Age. So Emily, can you start by sort of situating me with your family. What do you know – do you know your grandparents, where did they come from?

Emily May: Yeah, so both sides of my family are from the South. My maternal grandparents lived, and my mother grew up in the Northern Neck of Virginia. My paternal grandparents lived in and my father grew up and still lives in Northern North Carolina where I was born.

RS: What town in North Carolina?

EM: Littleton, North Carolina. It's very seriously a little town. [Laughter]

RS: I didn't know that connection [Whirring Noise]

EM: Is the fan - ?

RS: The fan is causing feedback, do you mind if we just turn it a little bit.

EM: Yeah, sure. [Pause in interview while fan is repositioned].

RS: Ok, so your grandparents are both from the South. What did they do for a living?

EM: Both my grandmothers were housewives and my maternal grandfather owned a Southern States store, which is a feed and supply store for farmers. My paternal grandfather was a forester. [Siren noise]

RS: I'm just going to wait for the sirens. Did your mom work growing up?

EM: So my parents divorced when I was about three. I lived mostly with my mom and visited my dad every other weekend. My mom was a librarian, so she started off as a kindergarten teacher. [Phone Rings] She got her masters and became a librarian first in elementary schools and then in public high schools.

RS: Great. Where did you grow up?

EM: Richmond, Virginia mostly. Once my parents split up we were in Richmond.

RS: And I read somewhere that you said as a young girl, you wanted to be executive of Pepsico, and also President of Homemakers of America?

EM: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

RS: Can you tell me a little bit more about that little girl?

EM: I was very ambitious from a young age. [Laughter] And honestly I don't know where it exactly came from. My parents certainly were very supportive of me. I think my mom was constantly always in shock. She was very much a B/C type student and just wanted to raise a kid who was nice, confident, cared about people and the world. And so the fact that I pushed myself to hard to try and get good grades and had big dreams for my future was always a little bit of a surprise to her. But it was around seventh grade, I think, and I was actually President of the Future Homemakers of America for my seventh grade class which meant that I made giant ghosts out of cheesecloth for Halloween and I cooked things like monkey bread after school. And then

I also had this dream at the same time that I was going to be the CEO of Pepsi. Pepsi of course, because I liked to drink Pepsi. I thought there was really nothing that would stand in my way. I even had this blue power suit that I called a power suit. I don't know where I got the terminology from but I even called this thing a power suit. I would put it on with my button down white collared shirt and I would prance around in what I would now call my executive director drag. But at the time I was just trying to be --. I don't know, trying to get ready for my future as the CEO of Pepsi. [Laughter]

RS: Do you think looking back it was related to having a single mom and feeling like you need to be able to provide?

EM: I mean, my mom was always very clear from the get go that I would need to be financially independent. She very much wanted to raise me with confidence which is something that she felt like she didn't have as much as she wanted in her own life. It was particularly a challenge because she divorced so young and never expected that. I think those things definitely played a part. I was also raised with this belief that I could do anything that I wanted to do. It wasn't that I had no insight into sexism, because my mom was a feminist and we certainly did have those conversations about how the world is different for girls. But it was almost like; because the world is different for girls it's going to be harder for you. You're going to have to work harder but that's even more reason why you should do it anyway. I think it was definitely related. I didn't necessarily feel a financial pressure to provide but I definitely felt like I could do anything.

RS: Did she use the word feminist? Did she identify as a feminist? Or you looking back think that?

EM: Yeah. I mean she didn't shove the feminist doctrine down my throat or anything. My aunt, when I was seven or eight, bought me the autobiography of Susan B Anthony. Very controversial figure I now know, but I was completely taken by this idea that she worked on this issue and faced such extreme persecution working on this issue that is such an obvious given now. And it wasn't even that long ago. I had a sense it was within the past hundred years. I was so taken by the idea that you could spend your whole life being persecuted for an idea that then history would just play out to be so obvious. And still am really taken by that idea. I think that basic concept is what has led me to want to work on street harassment and now want to work on online harassment as well. Because these are ideas that are very, very much, movements that are very much in their infancy. The idea that street harassment isn't ok, that you can't just say whatever you want to people on the internet. Very, very nascent in their sort of historical development. Not new, but from a movement standpoint still very young and very shocking to people. And there's so much hope there in that narrative that look-- this is always how it's happened. This is not new, and I'm not making things up that one day people will think obviously street harassment's not ok. Obviously you can't say whatever you want on the internet. That we'll get there, right? There's plenty of historical precedence for it, and there's historical precedence for the fact that it'll be really, really hard and that we'll face a lot of persecution for having this idea. And that we'll make mistakes and screw up and go from being at one point perhaps in our lives an obvious feminist champion to history looking back and being "oooh, maybe not."

RS: You said that was seventh grade that you got that book?

EM: That was when I was about seven. Yeah, I was young.

RS: How would you describe yourself in high school? I remember reading somewhere that you talked about volunteering in a soup kitchen --

EM: You did your research!

RS: -- helping you sort of redefine your goals. Can you tell me a little more about that?

EM: Yeah, this story is incredibly, I would say the most pivotal moment in my trajectory as an activist. And yet I am terrible at telling it and have been told I'm terrible at telling it. There's something that I'm missing in the way that I tell it because it doesn't fully add up to people in terms of what happened. I was active in my local church at the time and they did volunteer work, so I went to this thing called Harvest of Hope one year and went through fields that farmers had taken all the vegetables out of and gleaned them for what was left. Then the second year we went to DC and worked in soup kitchens and used that same produce that the different teams were bringing in to actually make meals for people that were homeless.

Certainly I knew the concept of homelessness before I went. I was 15 years old, but there was one night in particular where we went to this soup kitchen and I think my responsibility was cleaning plates or something like that. This man came up to me and he started talking to me at the end of the shift. So I engaged in a long conversation, we probably talked for about an hour. He was so insistent on these three things. Don't do the materials on the street. Stay in school, and do three times better than your parents. I was, of course I'm not going to do a bunch of drugs [Laughter] especially right off the street. I'm not going to not stay in school, and in terms of doing three times better than my parents, that seems hard. My mom's this librarian. It's a really great job. I don't even

know what that means. But he was so insistent in telling these things to me and literally repeating these things to me over and over again over the course of this hour that I spent with him. It was almost like this really intense experience that happened that was for this moment, for this period of time, when I was talking to him, I felt what it was like to be him. I fully plugged in in a deeply empathetic way that--later in life, maybe I shouldn't have been a social worker because not enough of a divide between people--that changed my life.

I think that what came out of that was going from being confused about why he's so insistent about these three things to really understanding the extreme degree of hopelessness that's involved. It's not just about addressing the food problem or addressing the housing problem, it's really about the years of hopelessness, years of doors being shut in his face and opportunities being gone. Sure, there were decisions that he wouldn't make again had he had the choice that led up to the fact that he was looking at his life at that point – at the same point that I was looking at my life thinking “I'm going to be CEO of Pepsico,” he's looking at his life like “This is just it, there's nowhere else, there's nowhere to go.” That was so deeply upsetting to me. And still is. I'm going to cry just telling the story. In a way that's hard to explain a little bit. But anyway, what happened after that was I cried a lot. They were like, “Did he make you cry?” And I was like “No! The world's making me cry!” And I really got it. I'm not doing anything else with my life but this. I'm not doing anything else. From when I was 15 to when I started Hollaback, it was all dedicated on anti-poverty stuff. I would still love to go back to that. I haven't told that story in years. I would love to go back to that field and work on it more. I think there's so much more work to be done there and such critical and important

work. But having worked in it for a long period of time, there's such complicated systems at play there that really keep people in their place and are designed to keep people in their place. So I did everything from - the only activist crew I could find in Richmond were the anarchists, so I joined the anarchist collective. [Laughter] I didn't really get the ideology behind it but they made sandwiches for the homeless every week and watched the Simpsons and had funny political things to say about the Simpsons so I thought that was pretty cool. I really got involved in anything I could get involved in. In undergraduate I really focused on this issue of poverty and addressing it and really seeing this huge gap in thoughtful academia around poverty and class - especially when you compare it to gender and race and sexuality. Where there's just such a robust set of literature. When it comes to poverty you've got like Marx and William Julius Wilson. A couple folks. Barbara Ehrenreich writing *Nickel and Dimed* and a few people but it's not the same. I think there's still a lot of work to be done there. And then--.

RS: Where were you in undergraduate?

EM: NYU, and my project at the end of that was why there's no poor-led poor movement in the United States. I got my master's in social policy at the London School of Economics and studied there why and how the day-to-day interactions with the welfare system were designed to make people less politically and financially empowered by design.

RS: Why did you go to London?

EM: I went to London because it sounds really fancy, and you only have to go to school for a year. It's cheaper than the United States. [Laughter] And it's London. [Laughter] They had a social policy program and in the U.S. it's mostly public policy

programs and I was more interested in education, healthcare, welfare poverty side of the equation than I was about some of the bigger public policy issues.

RS: So you got your masters and then came back. Were there particular teachers--
? Well. let's back up for a second. You're doing all this focus on poverty work. You had that historical model of Susan, Elizabeth Cady Stanton – was it Susan?

EM: Susan B. Anthony that I read, yeah.

RS: And were there other when you were in undergraduate or in graduate school – were you taking women's studies classes. Was gender a part of your --?

EM: Yeah, there was a huge lack of work on class and classism and poverty. I did independent studies in that area but most of my coursework was in the area of gender and sexuality and race. And I learned how to say race, gender, sexuality and class very quickly. [Laughter] Yeah, no definitely. I, being a girl, was very outwardly feminist. And very much identified as a feminist activist and went to the Southern Girls' Conference when I was 18, which is a conference for young ragtag feminists in the south.

RS: Does that still exist?

EM: I don't know. Fighting systems of patriarchy, we learned how to say no really loud. Learned how to sew my own maxi pads. Anyway, I was really into all that stuff and moved by all that stuff. In high school, I sort of am embarrassed to say at this point, but I was doing a lot of activist inspired artwork - most of which was totally over the frickin top. [Laughter] It was so over the top that it ceased to be art but was like "I have something to say and I'm seventeen." And my friend and I made this shirt that said *Dead men don't rape* and wore it to school and my teacher was like "not appropriate" and I said "it's just a fact" in that way that high schoolers can rationalize things. "It's just a

fact' they don't," completely ignoring the actual intent of it. That is not something I would do now. [Laughter] But, you know, I was pissed off. And I saw the ways in which that kind of oppression was happening in peoples lives and very much rejected this Stepford wife model which was the going model in the suburbs of Richmond, Virginia. It just didn't fit for me.

RS: What years did you go to college? When were you there?

EM: [19]99-2003.

RS: Did you, do you identify with the term third-wave? Did that mean something to you? Did you adopt that?

EM: I mean. Yes and no. I saw it – people were just like “This is what you're in. Here you go.” I was like, ok. It's better than the other ones [Laughter]. I didn't pick it up as a mantra. I feel like people just identified me as that. It's less interesting to me to categorize myself in that way. I find calling myself a feminist useful to the extent to which I'm a feminist, you're a feminist, we're feminist, we're on this team, yay. Whereas I found third-wave a little less useful to the extent that it seemed like a very academic construct. It seemed a way to sort of say “I'm not like those feminists over there.” Which seemed from a movement building perspective to not be particularly effective.

RS: You got your master's degree and you did anti-poverty work. Did you actually work as a social worker for a while?

EM: I was a case manager and outreach worker for mentally ill homeless adults. It was my first job out of college before I went to LSE, and after that I worked at an after school program with at risk youth, middle schoolers. Low-income middle school kids. I worked as a political action coordinator for an agency that oversaw about a hundred

different workforce development programs across New York City. I worked on four different political campaigns.

RS: What were those?

EM: I worked on one in London, working for Lynn Featherstone running for MP. I worked on one for Comtroller, Jim Brennan, who's still an assembly member. I worked on Eliot Spitzer's [Laughter]campaign, which – whatever. [Laughter] One of those people that history doesn't play out so well. Rather doesn't play themselves out so well. And then I worked on Yetta Kurland's campaign. who ran for city council.

RS: What did you learn from doing those?

EM: I think my twenties was largely about crossing things off my list in terms of “could I be good at this? Am I good at this? I'm alright but I'm not great” Cross it off. Could I be good at this? Is this interesting to me? Eh, not so much. So being a case manager and outreach worker was one of those things. Working in schools as a teacher was one of those things. I was good but I wasn't great. And political campaigns were one of those things. I was good and I didn't want to be great because the people who were great at it were not – didn't feel good to be great. The people that were great at it were not my kind of people. They were a little too cut throat, a little too aggressive, a little too out for some sort of power that it seems like wasn't worth getting. A little too ego driven. It wasn't a great fit for me. And that was what I was interested in learning. I mean, I love campaigns. Campaigns are really fun, but I learned that it's more fun to run a campaign to change a thing than it is to run a campaign to get a person elected.

RS: Do you think you learned techniques and approaches from those political campaigns that you've used?

EM: I don't know. I definitely learned a lot about power and specifically I learned a lot about how power operates, how people in power want to be treated, how people in power will just shut you out as soon as they decide that you're not useful to them anymore. Who gets power, how do you get it? There was a lot of learning that happened there that's helpful in terms of trying to get conversations about street harassment happening in unlikely places. And get funding, quite frankly, from people who don't care about street harassment, but for whatever reason, because I've built this relationship with them--I think at the end of the day, power is about relationships – will still be willing to fund the work.

RS: Hollaback took off. I was here right when it was, maybe it was a year after you started or something. It took off incredibly quickly. That whole phase, at least from the outside. You probably had been working on the idea for years but can you tell me the sort of birth story of Hollaback and looking back how you reflect on that early period?

EM: Yeah. Hollaback actually started back in 2005 by myself and six other folks between the ages of twenty and twenty four. There were three men and four women and we'd recently heard the story of a young woman named Thao Nguyen who was riding the subway when an older man sat down across from her and started to publicly masturbate. And so Thao took his picture with the idea of taking it to the police, the police ignored her, and she put it on Flickr and it went viral. It made it to the front cover of the New York Daily News and it ignited this citywide conversation about public masturbation. At the same time we were sharing our own experiences with street harassment, which we had had hundreds of, individually at that point. My friend Sam Carter looked me in the eye and said "Emily, you live in this totally different city than I do." What was interesting

about it was that I went through all those women's studies classes; nobody ever first of all gave me the language to call what was happening to me street harassment, but nobody even ever contextualized it as a form of sexism. Sexism was the wage gap. Sexism was reproductive justice. Sexism was gender-based violence but this thing that happened to me on this day-to-day basis wasn't sexism. So in my own mind I thought about it like it was just something, I was a feminist. I was a feminist. I thought of myself as being quite tough and I thought about it as some sort of weakness on my part that it hurt to the degree to which it did. Because I didn't have that context, that framework to understand it as something that felt like it was about me but it wasn't really about me. It was about the more messed up world that we lived in. And that sucked. [Laughter] I hope that gender studies teachers today don't make that mistake. Because it's really unfortunate not to connect people's experiences, their day-to-day experiences, with this theoretical concept that you're learning in a class. There we were and we were like "yeah, this is messed up" and at the time we were like "what do we call it?" We just referred to it as the crap guys would say to us on the street. P.S. - these are all people with very academic backgrounds. None of us are dumb cookies, right? So we were like, well, we can't just call it catcalling because that diminishes what it is and language is important. What is it? My friend Kaya was like, "it's harassment." And we were like "It is harassment! It's totally harassment! What kind of harassment? We can't just call it sexual harassment because then people think about the workplace." Then she was like, "Let's call it street harassment!" And we were like, "What if it happens on the subway?" [Laughter] "I don't know, let's just call it street harassment. It'll be fine." We weren't the first people in history to call it street harassment, there was an academic back in 1981 who referred to it as street harassment.

It was named a million different things by the few pioneering academics who decided to talk about it before that point. Everything from gender based violence in public space to all this stuff. But we thought street harassment worked and we went with it and Hollaback took off and it was just a local project here in New York City. There's actually a chain of emails over on the wall where we decided what we were going to name it that ends with me being "I don't know if we should just name it Hollaback New York City. I think we can really take this global." Back from 2005. From the beginning it was resonant with people. Within a year we were doing Good Morning America and the Today Show that happened about this issue of street harassment which we had literally had to make ourselves experts in because there were no other experts to be the experts in this thing. Because people just weren't talking about it but everyone was experiencing it and it really hit this nerve.

RS: How did you - Were you raising money? Were you working other jobs?

EM: It was all a side project. All during that I was working other jobs. I think when we launched it I was the director of development for the Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation. Then I traveled around Central America for a while. [Laughter] Then I came back and was special projects coordinator for Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow. All still working within the anti-poverty sector for those first five years.

It wasn't until 2009 when I started to really realize the impact we'd made with Hollaback felt greater to me than any impact I'd been able to make professionally. I was at a point in my career when I was really able to make profound impact professionally in my day jobs, and I loved my job at the time and I was doing awesome kickass stuff, but

still, you put the tiniest bit of energy into Hollaback and you'd just see these huge ripples. And it felt to me like having watched the movement for those first five years, historically ready to really be blown out into the movement that now we know it is today. That was very, it felt instinctually, ready.

I quit my full time well paying senior management job on May first of 2010. I had been rejected at that point, having been a director of development I had done my work, I had been rejected by eight foundations and two fellowships and was stark raving mad that nobody would fund this. Everybody said they wanted to fund stuff that was innovative. Everybody said that they wanted to fund these breakthrough models. Here we were; no. I was just like, "Screw you, I'm going to do it anyway." I did it and we ran a kickstarter campaign and we raised twelve, thirteen thousand dollars and then the Ms. Foundation showed up and they helped us out a little bit. A funder, Voqal, showed up and they helped us out a little bit. And the first 6-9 months I wasn't paid but then finally I was. It was a really, really intense time.

A lot of people look at that story and the success and the trajectory of Hollaback and they think "Oh, you know, I want to do that too." Do you really? I worked non-stop. I had to almost completely stop hanging out with my friends. I saw very little of my boyfriend at the time, gained fifteen pounds eating rice and beans because I wasn't making any money. I would shoot up out of bed at seven am like my butt was on fire, would work straight through to midnight, go to sleep, do it again. I knew that if I just input enough that out the other end would come this movement. I knew it, and I was right, but it was a really significant personal sacrifice that I cannot in good faith advise people to do. I think the only reason you should it is if you can't do anything else. And

that was how I felt at that point. I just knew it, I saw it. I knew what was going to happen. I knew that basically the only thing standing in the way of the sort of movement unfolding completely, it had already started, but more completely, was me, and my ability to get stuff done. You know, and to create these pathways for people all around the world to do this and to get stuff done. People just needed a little bit of loving. And they would be able to make this happen in their communities and to scale that out. It was intense but it worked.

RS: Looking back, I was talking yesterday with Rye Young about the impact of the recession. The crash, foundations and fundraising and all that. Do you think that had an impact on your ability to raise that early money or do you think it was the topic?

EM: I think it was the topic, because we're still in that same place. I know it doesn't look like we're in the same place now that we have an office and we have staff and I'm sure the recession had something to do with it but I think that at the end of the day, street harassment is disproportionately experienced by young people, urban people, people of color, women, LGBTQ individuals, and these are people that don't have money. The movement itself is still in this place where – it's starting to change – but people largely think of street harassment in terms of their own experiences. If you are a sixty-year-old woman with money sitting on a board of one of these foundations, your experience of it is that it was way worse in the seventies, that it doesn't really happen anymore. And also because you have money, you're taking cars wherever you're going, so the issue of public safety isn't the same. You're not relegated to public transport. And so it doesn't have the urgency for folks. It's not at a place – the reproductive justice movement you could say, you could say the same thing except it's far more advanced in

its trajectory. People understand that just because they're not of reproductive age anymore that there are people who are. Whereas with street harassment there's still that huge lack of data and understanding and the movement is still so young that people don't understand that just because it's not happening to them in the same way doesn't mean that it's not happening.

On top of that, I think that's made more complex--I think had we entered into a new issue but used tactics that were really familiar to people, that weren't innovative, that were just like "we're doing a training," that kind of thing--we probably would've been able to raise money; innovation wouldn't have been the issue. Had we developed an innovation but stayed on an issue that was well known like poverty or reproductive justice, I think we could've figured it out with the foundations. But we were trying to grow a movement from its infancy on an issue that had no notable track record in the foundation world. And we were trying to do it using a strategy that nobody had ever done before. Logical person would say, "Well, street harassment has obviously existed since the beginning of time, so it's going to take a new strategy to address things if we're really going to blow it out." But logic doesn't necessarily work that way with foundations and I think we're still struggling in that same way. We've certainly gotten some traction but still today a lot of our money is coming in through fellowships and things that are like "I like Emily, but I don't really care about street harassment" or "I like this model you're developing, I think it's really interesting, but I don't really care about street harassment," and we still haven't seen foundations step up to the plate on this issue area. There's no obvious portfolio for us to go to.

RS: So, it seems like, really Hollaback as it is anyway, couldn't exist without the Internet and social media. Can you talk to me about your reflections about – but you also have, Debjani [Roy] said she was just in London meeting with people face to face; otherwise it's all online. Can you talk to me about what you see as the power of these things and the limitations? How your strategy, your chapters, and your approach harnesses what you can and is creative about what it can't.

EM: The power of it is that with the internet we've been able to take this thing that otherwise would've stayed local, right? Maybe we would've printed something and sent it to god knows where around the world and maybe somebody would've seen it and thought I'll do something similar in my community, but you know really would've mostly stayed local before the internet. We were able to use the internet as a communication tool to scale it out and I think in addition to that, the internet is this place where everyone's a leader. Everyone has followers. And that young people in particular aren't interested, and maybe they've never been, I don't know. But certainly now they're not interested in climbing up the ladder of some giant feminist institution. Everybody thinks they're their own leader of feminism and is tweeting and writing articles and some of them are writing books and having speaking engagements but everyone sort of has their own voice and identifies themselves as a leader. What we were able to do which was so awesome was be like, "Yeah, do that. You *are* the leader." [Laughter]. You know? Make that happen. But have that communication, the ability to communicate those tools and share those tools with people so that they could do it and could do it in conversation with hundreds of other people around the world that were also doing it.

RS: Can you connect that for me to what you were saying before about what you learned about power and how power works?

EM: How it's relationships?

RS: Yeah, but also are young people who think they're a leader – Is that naïve based on a lack of understanding about how power works, or is that a very prescient understanding of how power works in terms of their ability to make change?

EM: I think it depends on the person doing it. I think some people are very thoughtful and nuanced in their understanding of how to use online feminism and some people just are holy terrors. My critique of where the feminist movement is today and the challenges is that because we saw so many great institutions built up these women studies and gender studies portfolios, so many people who are feminists today came up through that, myself included. But academic institutions are very much about critiquing things; they are not about creating things. As these sort of young feminists have grown up through that, they have taken that love of critique--which, I did all that too--I remember sitting watching TV and being like – racist, sexist, homophobic, sexist. [Laughter] I remember doing all that and I think it's an incredibly useful skill if paired with the ability to create things.

I think the challenge now is that we are doing a few things, I think first of all - a lot of online feminism is being gatekeepers to what is feminism. Who is feminist? How are they feminist? If you don't have this academic, intersectional analysis -- and even the word intersectionality is not accessible to so many people who are otherwise quite feminist, they're on our team, right?--that somehow you're not enough. Even the articles – is this TV show feminist? I'm like, what? What kind of question is that? That's a

ridiculous question. Who are you to be the gatekeepers to feminism? But I think the other piece of that, other than the incredibly exclusionary part of it, is that when you do see people creating things, feminists love to critique them. Hello! Go spend some time with Rush Limbaugh. Critique what he's doing. But nobody wants to touch that, they're just dismissive. It's so much better to critique whatever the hell Hollaback's doing, or some other awesome feminist activist organization is doing, then they would critique and play ball with some of these big players that are destroying women's lives on a massive scale. A massive scale, and are being relatively untouched. Left relatively untouched by online feminism. They're just seen as a waste of time. You know, maybe they are, but I personally would love to see a rule enacted where you have to go after two out-and-out big boy jerks before you can critique another feminist.

I have a rule where I do not publicly critique other feminists. I will call them. I will be like, "hey, you should work on this thing." Certainly I will have private conversations about things as a way of learning and parsing out why are they doing this and how are they doing this and what's the impact on the movement. But I will never do it publicly. I think it's terrible for movement building. It's the same reason that I think the waves, while a useful academic construct, and I think critiquing anything is a useful academic construct; it's not useful in movement building. There's a huge divide there that has burned out and tortured so many incredible feminists and they don't talk about it publicly. They just leave. They slowly leave the field, and that's the result. I want to build a movement that's inclusive and welcoming. I'm not saying we can't critique each other, but coming out of the anti-poverty movement and talking to friends in other related

movements, it's not the same intense focus on critique as it is in feminism and I think that that has allowed those movements to accelerate much, much faster than ours.

RS: So you think it comes from the academic training of critical analysis or that's where that impulse comes from?

EM: That's my theory, yeah. That's where it originates – and that not being paired with creating stuff.

RS: Although that seems interestingly to me to be shifting. That so, at UNC, at Duke, at all these other places, innovation and social entrepreneurship – in fact, I feel like not everybody has to go out and create their thing.

EM: Right, yeah.

RS: There's other ways to participate in a movement than starting--. There's actually a huge emphasis among young people that I'm seeing now, that innovation.

EM: Yeah, no, it's very trendy right now.

RS: Yeah. But not always connected to women's studies departments. It tends to be in other places. I'm interested – you and I have had conversations in the past about the role of academic programs and researchers and stuff. I know that Hollaback has recently been publishing research.

EM: With Cornell, yeah.

RS: With Cornell, on sexual harassment. Can you talk about what you would like to see? What would you change about women's studies or gender studies in order to benefit the movement more?

EM: Yeah. [Pauses] I just think we need to teach people how to make stuff, honestly. And maybe to build some empathy for people who are making stuff. [Laughter]

When I was in college I was able to take a class that was like – here's all this-- this guy didn't come out of feminism, but he came out the environmental movement--like every single part of a toolkit on how to build a campaign. One week we're doing press releases, and one week we're doing strategy, and I think stuff like that is awesome and essential. Recently I've really been taken by the idea of human centered design which I think is very grounded in this feminist principle of the people who need the stuff should be the people who are making the stuff, and that this innovation, social entrepreneurship thing that's happening, it's not about the charismatic leader who sits in their shower and comes up with the great idea. That doesn't work, and when it does work it only works because that charismatic leader in their shower has had thousands of conversations with people who would ultimately be the end user of this. And is somehow able to synthesize it into something that works. So I'd love to see more time spent on human centered design, more time spent on movement building theory.

Research, right? That is an act of creation. Particularly in these fields that nobody wants to touch, like street harassment, like online harassment where the data just doesn't exist yet. I'd just like to broadly see more of a gear towards action – and it's not that I want to critique to go away, because I think the critique is useful, but how do you present the critique in a way in which it is useful and it's not just you sounding off on Twitter. How do you give that, give that feedback either to – we'll call it the person, how do you give it to them so that have a relationship with them, so that you can work together in a movement. How do you write an op ed that shifts the public's thinking? Not just skewers the individual who you're going after who is, P.S., your friend the feminist, but shifts the public's thinking about the way we're considering these issues and framing these issues.

I think that's the kind of stuff that people just aren't taught to do and we see people coming in with these amazing intersectional analyses but without any sort of framework on how to really get shit done. And that's all it is. Movement building is ninety nine percent mucking through the muckety muck. Yeah, occasionally you'll get an award or get something published and that's when everyone will cheer, but that's not the actual work. The work is having a million doors slammed in your face and being told that what you're trying to do is impossible: That nobody will ever care, that nobody will ever fund it, that people in the United States don't even experience street harassment. I've been told all kinds of crazy stuff, right? I think that it's a detriment to other young feminists because they feel like if they're not writing the article or having the tweet that's retweeted five hundred million times, or winning the award that somehow they're not doing the work, when the work is work. It's mostly muck – muckety muck, you know?

RS: I can tell, when you're talking about the critique and the going after feminists instead of "bad guys" that there's personal experience wrapped up in that. I know you don't want to critique other feminists, but can you talk about the experience of having been through that and being the target of some of that?

EM: Yeah, I mean we have been [pause] I think relatively lucky on that front. The harassment that we face from people outside the movement has been far worse than what we face from inside the movement. But I have had a couple [pauses] harassers that were feminists and that were really, really scary. Really scary. Like, scared to go home alone at night situation. I think that both were very different – I guess they existed about 5 years apart – and both just made me think "God, is this a movement that I want to be a part of. When this is my teammate?" That's my personal experience, these two very scary people,

but I see it. I see it. And I saw it before I even started Hollaback. My number one concern in starting Hollaback as a nonprofit wasn't the rape threats that I get. It wasn't being told that I have three chins by people on the internet. It was this fear of the hatred and the vitriol that comes from within feminism and seeing that play out in these two extreme incidences, lesser so in other instances, and certainly seeing it played out among my friends. I think it's confusing. And I think a lot of it comes from the fact that a lot of people have experienced a lot of trauma and they are playing that out in really unfortunate ways. That's the extreme examples, and the less extreme examples are part of the culture of online feminism that's just 'critique, critique, critique,' right? Which doesn't really make people want to go out with no funding, no support, and keep building. That's when you see people leave the movement which is the most heartbreaking thing to me and I've intimately seen friends do it and I know that they need to for personal reasons, but it makes me so mad at what we've built that it can't sustain them. Yeah.

RS: Do you – I feel like race is always fraught in our culture, but the last few years have been heightened sort of. The tension is on the surface a lot of the times. You have this international, multiethnic, multiracial organization with a white woman in charge. How have you found that playing out in your relationships with both Americans and the international community that you've built? Do you feel like the last two, three years have been particularly difficult in these ways or not?

EM: I think what's happening in the racial justice movement in America is awesome and I think that we can't move forward with the anti-sexism movement or the anti-homophobia movement without also moving forward on the racial justice movement

and it's so cool to see that history happening. Globally I think that race means wildly different things in different cultures. What it means to be a person of color in India, for example. What does that mean? And oftentimes I think that there is this desire from an American standpoint to think about race playing out the same in all cultures everywhere and it just doesn't. I think that's why it's so critical to have this leader-ful movement. I am who I am, I'm a white woman, I'm cisgendered. I don't represent the movement. I think that it was almost my discomfort with representing the movement that led to the structure of Hollaback where we do have all these site leaders all around the world that are representing their communities and their identities and I think that ultimately it's the strength of these leaders that helps to navigate that. I'm not going to get it right every time, I'm not going to have every answer. I certainly can't have a different life experience than the one that I've had. And I don't think anybody can and that's cool. As long as there's a bunch of us.

RS: My daughter's in China for the summer and she has a Chinese roommate and she's trying to explain the Charleston massacre to her Chinese roommate who could not – did not – couldn't understand. She had no context. Didn't understand why people have guns anyways. She said trying to talk about American race relations in some other place -

EM: So hard

RS: Just makes you see it so differently.

EM: Yeah, and what I find hope in in what's happening right now, Black Lives Matter, and the horrific, horrific instances of violence that have happened particularly against African Americans, is that stuff has always happened and now people are paying attention to it. It's the same thing we see with street harassment. It's always happened

and now all of the sudden there's an infrastructure with which people can start to think about these issues and then you see everything get bubbled up in a way where it used to be ignored and pushed to the bottom of the pile. That is a testament to years and years and years of movement building on the racial justice front. If you're not in that, as the public, you can just look at that and say "well now all this stuff's happening." No, no, no, no, no, this stuff is always happening, just the organizers have been laying that groundwork for people to finally pay attention and now that people are paying attention, America's waking up to what it's like to be black in America. I find so much hope in that, however I do know that a lot of my African American friends are just like, it's so depressing. It's so depressing. Obviously the instances of violence are so depressing, but you combine that with study after study coming out about the systemic oppression that black people face. It's so, I think, hard on a personal level to be on a team that's just getting battered and bruised. But has, frankly, it's always – what I tell myself anyways so I don't slit my wrists at night [Laughter] – it's always happened but now people are paying attention and it's because of those stories that we have an opportunity for change.

RS: Do you feel like the particular political context we're in has had-- We have this sort of weird political context where we have a Democratic president and yet a very divided and politically, you know, stuck, system, and unbelievably crude political dialogue going on that to some degree has always happened but is also at a different level in some ways now. I don't know if you're able to reflect on how the political period of the time that you're in shapes your work or your ability to get things done or your approach?

EM: Yeah, I think that from a movement trajectory, movements start because people tell their stories. They grow with diverse decentralized leadership. People start to pay attention with research, and then you see some policy change start to happen. And then I think cultural change is the web that connects all those four things and I think that we are very squarely in the – and I think once you start doing it you can't stop doing it - I think we're very squarely in the storytelling and decentralized leadership part of the street harassment movement. Starting to edge into the research stuff, but Hollaback - even when partnering with Cornell, which is an amazing institution - shouldn't be creating one of the largest studies around street harassment for us to really be there in that research spot. We really need to see the government showing up and doing that stuff and many institutions not inspired by advocacy organizations doing that type of stuff. On the policy front we've certainly toed into the water locally, but at the end of the day we don't take a pro-criminalization stance. We don't want to increase criminalization of street harassment because the ways in which we fear it would disproportionately target low income communities and communities of color. Also, I don't see it as being effective. I think what we need is that culture change which is really a financial investment from governments. It's investing in PSAs, it's investing in education, it's providing the research, all that prevention work that goes into preventing this from happening to begin with instead of just playing whack-a-mole with the people who have perpetrated street harassment later.

That work isn't just hard to fund because it's street harassment, that work is hard to fund period. Governments want to provide services to people afterwards, when there is a quote-unquote demonstrated need. Not before. The prevention work is, there's a

movement to start to fund it, but it's really hard to measure. How do you measure something that doesn't happen? And there's not a lot of money around that. This is a long-winded way to say that we haven't really been so directly impacted by what's happening in Washington because the changes we're looking for are cultural. But, I think that what's interesting from a bird's eye view is that this generation of online feminism is largely looking for cultural change not political change. I think that our parents' generation did a bang up job of getting a lot of those structural pieces in place and a lot of those laws in place. Certainly not all of them, there's certainly improvements to be done – yay gay marriage – but a lot of them were in place so that this generation has really been able to walk in and say “ok, shit's still happening, so what else can we fix?” I think there's a ton of energy around day-to-day instances of racism and sexism and homophobia, which tend to bubble up in the media in these more extreme like Charleston massacres, but which the organizers on the ground are not just seeing the massacre. They're seeing that entire spectrum of violence against people and they're seeing it as part of a culture that's racist, part a culture that's sexist, not necessarily part of a problem with a policy. I think that that's where our generation is going to push a lot of change and has pushed a lot of change – is on that changing hearts and minds piece. And I think that's where, when we've seen movements that have sort of waned, it's because they lost that hearts and minds messaging in the same way and I think at the end of the day that's - it's god-awful impossible to fund. It's terrible to try and measure, but that's the engine that fuels everything else. That's the work that we need to be doing and that's why online feminism is having a great impact. Because it's getting those voices out there to change those hearts and minds, not just going to work at a Domestic Violence shelter.

RS: Are there places in the world where street harassment is less of a problem?

EM: Well, you know, there's some preliminary data that shows that maybe – there's really interesting anecdotal data from Egypt that during the Egyptian revolution for those seventeen days that street harassment didn't exist, that everyone was working together. Everyone was one the street, but everyone was working together to make a revolution go down, and interesting too that in Egypt they say, in the sixties and seventies, street harassment existed but it was very, very unusual and when it did happen, that men would actually chase harassers down the street and shave their head as a way of publicly marking them. There was a whole culture where it wasn't acceptable. Now, of course, you go to Egypt and lord help you. I mean, I had a just awful experience there. [Laughter] But, you know, at different points in their history it hasn't been that way. Which has given the Egyptian people a lot of hope that it doesn't have to be that way. Egypt is one of the strongest - if not the strongest - location for anti-street harassment activism in the world.

RS: Are you doing, is anyone doing research on that question more broadly?

EM: I don't know. Oh, where it's worse and stuff?

RS: Because it's interesting, you know. Is it place based or is it time – like you're suggesting - it's not necessarily about the place as it is about the place in time of a particular place.

EM: So our work with Cornell was a comparative study of thirty-eight cities. I don't think the data's really robust enough to make a final conclusion on that. You'd really need a much larger data set. My hypothesis is that places where sexism is worse or there are times that sexism is worse, the street harassment is probably worse too.

RS: Right. It would be interesting to know, people always point to Norway and Sweden and these places where the policies are amazing. It would be interesting to know whether there's less street harassment.

EM: Well we don't have a site there. So maybe there is less street harassment there. I recently heard that in Brighton, in the UK, very little street harassment happens. I think part of it too is areas where there is a feeling of community and community accountability has an impact on it, because you're not in the same anonymous space. But, that being said, my sister grew up in Littleton North Carolina and she gets street harassed walking through the Wal-Mart parking lot and knows pretty much fifty percent of the people at Wal-Mart. So it doesn't fully exempt you.

RS: Is there anything you would like to talk about that we haven't talked about?

EM: No, not particularly.

RS: Anything I should've asked?

EM: No, Thanks so much.

END OF INTERVIEW.

Transcriber: Emerson Rhudy

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