

# The Subversive Remix Rhetoric of Saved By The Bell Hooks

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*This article discusses Liz Larabee's subversive remix rhetoric for her Tumblr blog, Saved by the bell hooks. Larabee's mashup memes feature image stills from Saved by the Bell and direct quotes from bell hooks. These memes facilitate the uptake of feminist discourse through the use of popular media while subverting the assumptions of that media. Larabee therefore uses these subversive mashup memes for social critique. I also illustrate the evolution of Larabee's practices for the mashup memes based on her reflections on the ethics of racial representation in her remix rhetoric. I conclude with implications for academics who wish to use academic theory in response to sociopolitical issues in public discourse.*

**Keywords:** activism, counterpublics, feminism, memes, remix

*"No idea can become a movement if the concept is never shared."<sup>1</sup>*

Liz Larabee is a 33-year-old white woman who now attends graduate school in Washington, D.C. (She has worked in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, as an artist, writer, teacher, and entrepreneur.) Larabee is also the creator of *Saved by the bell hooks*—a Tumblr blog that received 20,000 followers in only a matter of days after creation<sup>2</sup> and became the 10th most viral blog on Tumblr in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, she attributes this blog as the project that “helped solidify [her] decision to redirect and go to grad school . . . to study disparities within access to education.”<sup>456</sup> *Saved by the bell hooks* circulates memes that mashup image stills from the popular television sitcom *Saved by the Bell* with direct quotes from bell hooks, a celebrated intersectional feminist scholar. The blog's

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<sup>1</sup> And Over Here We See, “Clicktivism,” Tumblr (blog), 31 January 2016, <http://www.andoverhereweseetumblr.com/post/138391546401/daji-ruhu-halfdesiqueen-people-shit-on>.

<sup>2</sup> Liz Larabee and Danielle Henderson, “Hey Girl, I'm Saved by the bell hooks: A Two-Way Interview,” *YMCA* (blog), February 13, 2015, <http://www.ymcablog.com/2015/02/13/hey-girl-im-saved-by-the-bell-hooks-a-two-way-interview-summary/#sthash.NrgkCRST.dpbs>.

<sup>3</sup> Tumblr, “Most Viral Tumblrs,” *Year in Review* (blog), December 8, 2015 (12:08 a.m.), <http://yearinreview.tumblr.com/post/134773074682/most-viral-tumblrs>.

<sup>4</sup> Kiara Collins, “An Exclusive Interview with the Creator of ‘Saved by the bell hooks,’” *Blavity* (2016), <http://www.blavity.com/blavity-feature-saved-by-the-bell-hooks-2>.

<sup>5</sup> Liz Larabee, surveyed by Kyle Larson, March 10, 2016, transcript.

<sup>6</sup> My survey with Larabee coincided with Collins' interview with her for *Blavity* (which wasn't published at the time of contact). Collins and I were coincidentally interested in some of the same topics. After Larabee asked me, I agreed that she could provide me with some of the same answers on the survey to save her time.

memes all share a similar remix aesthetic: capitalized yellow font layered on top of one of the show's stills with a link to the quote's source text directly beneath the meme (see Figure 1).

Larabee uses *Saved by the bell hooks* to circulate memes as a subversive rhetorical practice. In Figure 1, for example, one finds an image of Zack Morris holding a life-size cardboard cutout of Kelly Kapowski. The bell hooks quote layered on this image reads, "Identity is always about representation." As indicative in Larabee's inclusion of the hashtags "cardboard kelly" and "Human Zack," the juxtaposition of this image and quote performs a critique of how popular media construct sexist standards of representation and its adverse impacts on identities. Virginia Kuhn indicates the liberatory potential of this critique for remix rhetoric: "The power differentials of society are hugely disparate, and access to and control of the field of representation is a crucial mechanism for any type of liberatory potential."<sup>7</sup> In fact, Larabee created *Saved by the bell hooks* as a result of popular media's politics of representation in the context of (and how it ultimately informs) current events:



Figure 1. Source: Larabee, *Meme on Identity & Representation*.

My interests are all over the map, but in recent years I have developed a strong commitment to being vocal about politics, social inequity, and marginalized voices. I initially began it [the blog] after chatting with some friends at a bar. We had been talking about the representation of people of color in Hollywood, the representation of women in the film *Selma*, and how the conversation about both had shifted since the media coverage of Ferguson. This was also on the heels of the original #OscarsSoWhite hashtag which is even more painfully relevant this year. There is an embarrassing failure of work extended to and recognition for people of color in Hollywood. That these themes remain speaks at best to ignorance and at worst to willful discrimination. Add to that my penchant for puns, wordplay, humor, and memes. It was a natural extension of my interests.<sup>8</sup>

Popular media often represent white men as multi-dimensional individuals who can fulfill many different social, professional, and emotional roles. At the same time, these media often represent women—especially women of color—as one-dimensional characters that adhere to the constraints of a white supremacist patriarchal notion of what women can be, do, and feel. The meme's still image exhibits a one-dimensional, cardboard Kapowski in the hands of Morris to represent and critique this misrepresentation. That is, the meme's juxtaposition re-presents the habits and customs of this patriarchal norm (in the image) while working to unmask the hidden assumptions embedded in that genre (in the quotation). As Larabee states, "It was a show created within an

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Kuhn, "The Rhetoric of Remix," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 9 (2012): Sec. 3.8, doi: 10.3983/twc.2012.0358.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, "An Exclusive Interview"; Larabee, surveyed by Kyle Larson, March 10, 2016, transcript.

industry and culture postured toward patriarchal aesthetics, storylines, and motivations.”<sup>9</sup> I will demonstrate that Larabee uses mashup memes in two ways. She remixes elements of popular media to secure the uptake<sup>10</sup> of feminist discourse while simultaneously using this discourse to subvert the generic assumptions of popular media. *Saved by the bell hooks* offers a model of remix that academics might find useful or at least interesting for rethinking the more traditional publication practices of public intellectualism in order to experience wider public circulation of academic theory.

### Frames for Analysis of *Saved by the bell hooks* Remix Rhetoric

To understand Larabee’s remix rhetoric, I follow Kuhn’s recognition of remix as a digital argument or speech act through its assemblage of pre-existing material into a new work so that its interaction creates new meaning.<sup>11</sup> Remix as a digital argument relies on the rhetorical principle of synchresis. David Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony Michel explain synchresis as “the process by which separate semiotic elements . . . that involve separate modalities add up to a semiotic whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>12</sup> That is, the meaning of the whole composition or meme is greater than the combined meaning of the individual parts of the composition due to how the interaction between its parts also informs the understanding of the whole. These interacting separate “semiotic elements” (or signs used to convey meaning) here consist of images and words, including the words functioning as hashtags.

Importantly, interpretation is *not* an automatic and neutral act. A person’s understanding of something is, to an extent, a process of that person’s selection of meaning rather than a consequence wholly determined by another person’s intention to produce meaning. The audience’s interpretation of the whole composition’s meaning based on the interaction between the images and words relies on culturally learned practices of thinking.<sup>13</sup> Visual habits of recognition and interpretation are socially learned patterns that privilege only certain ways of perceiving reality. These socially learned patterns can and often do maintain dominant social groups’ understanding of the world as the implicit default of what counts as “normal.” People’s learned habits that consciously or unconsciously select, filter, and resist potential alternative meanings in the whole composition’s interpretation function through what Dylan Dryer refers to as “uptake residue.”<sup>14</sup> Anis Bawarshi

<sup>9</sup> Becca Wall, “Liz Larabee was ‘Saved by the Bell’ (hooks),” *Moxie*, 2015, <http://findyourmoxie.com/2015/11/30/liz-larabee-was-saved-by-the-bell-hooks/>.

<sup>10</sup> I adopt Kimberly K. Emmons’ definition of uptake, or what Dylan Dryer alternatively refers to as “uptake capture.” Emmons defines it as tendencies or “dispositions assumed through the use of genres.” These learned tendencies have the power “to position subjects and to allow them to inhabit (only) particular social roles.” When one regularly watches a show within the popular media sitcom genre like *Saved by the Bell*, for instance, the person can internalize and/or believe its one-dimensional representation of women to be accurate. The person can then consciously or unconsciously apply that (mis)belief in social situations as a standard by which to understand and treat women. See Kimberly K. Emmons, “Uptake and the Biomedical Subject,” in *Genre in a Changing World*, ed. Charles Bazerman, Adair Bonini, and Debora Figueiredo, 134-157 (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2009). 139, 138.

<sup>11</sup> Kuhn, “The Rhetoric of Remix,” Sec. 3.2.

<sup>12</sup> David M. Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel, *The Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping a Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric* (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2012), 136.

<sup>13</sup> Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel, *The Available Means of Persuasion*, 134.

<sup>14</sup> Dylan B. Dryer, “Disambiguating Uptake: Toward a Tactical Research Agenda on Citizens’ Writing,” in *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, eds. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 73.

explains, “We do not simply respond to the immediate demands of a rhetorical situation, an utterance, a text, a genre. Uptakes have memories in the sense that they are learned recognitions and inclinations that, over time and through affective attachments and formations of power, become habitual and take on a life of their own.”<sup>15</sup> For instance, one only needs to do a Google image search for #IfTheyGunnedMeDown to see how corporate news media often visually represent the victims of police brutality as “thugs” who are then implicitly deemed “unworthy of living” and visually represent the murderers of these victims as “upstanding Americans who serve and protect” (although both can indeed be “true” for dominant social groups in a white supremacist society like the United States—it’s just a matter of *who* is “served” and “protected”<sup>16</sup>). When these groups can establish their learned visual habits as what counts as “normal” and “just the way things are,” these groups’ oppressive ideologies informing those habits can consequently become “normal” and continue to exist without being challenged. Marginalized social groups therefore benefit from subversive rhetorical practices that can disrupt these habits, similar to the use of visual juxtaposition in #IfTheyGunnedMeDown.

Kristie Fleckenstein’s theory of “visual antinomy”<sup>17</sup> explains Laribee’s memes as subversive digital arguments. Susan Jarratt defines *nomos* as “provisional codes (habits or customs) of social and political behavior, socially constructed and historically (even geographically) specific.”<sup>18</sup> These norms of social and political behavior are shaped by dominant social groups’ power. Dominant social groups form and exist through “dominant publics” with institutional power to widely circulate their own discourses through government, education, and media. Dominant publics shape how people come to know themselves, each other, and the world. “Antinomy” is resistance to dominant habits or customs of social and political behavior. Counterpublics<sup>19</sup> can use visual antinomy and circulate subversive remix rhetoric to create, maintain, and provoke oppositional ways to know themselves, each other, and the world.<sup>20</sup> Extending Kenneth Burke’s “perspective by incongruity,” visual antinomy describes a subversive literacy of social action that counterpublics can specifically use to challenge the norms of dominant visual habits or perceptions. It “predisposes individuals to engage in popular literacy: the self-sponsored, nonacademic acts of meaning making that can be used to resist dominant constructions of reality.”<sup>21</sup> People can use visual antinomy to

<sup>15</sup> Anis Bawarshi, “Between Genres: Uptake, Memory, and US Public Discourse on Israel-Palestine,” in *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, eds. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 49-50.

<sup>16</sup> Hint: white people.

<sup>17</sup> Visual antinomy, or visual *anti-nomos* in direct reference to classical Greek rhetoric.

<sup>18</sup> Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 74.

<sup>19</sup> I use “counterpublic” based on research findings and experiences in reference to a space and/or network of individuals from marginalized social groups formed through the invention and circulation of performative counterdiscourse on Tumblr. In doing so, I recognize the usefulness of both Nancy Fraser’s deliberative framework regarding the oppositional character of counterpublics and Michael Warner’s performative framework regarding the formation of (counter)publics through the circulation of texts. The feminist counterpublic on Tumblr functions as a space and/or network of empowerment and support, preparing individuals for performing resistance to dominant publics.

<sup>20</sup> As Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi write, “Just as the constraints and conventions of genres can lead to the creation of alternatives, the norms of dominant groups within the public sphere can lead to alternative norms of public speech . . . and styles of political behavior that enable the formation of oppositional identities and uptakes.” Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi, “Introduction: From Genre Turn to Public Turn: Navigating the Intersections of Public Sphere Theory, Genre Theory, and the Performances of Publics,” in *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, eds. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Kristie Fleckenstein, *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition Classroom* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 120.

juxtapose competing perceptions of social and political habits and customs (*nomoi*) in order to create an ideological tension or paradox for audiences to interpret. Grappling with this tension or paradox can help audiences subvert the influence of dominant perceptions and form oppositional discourses and identities.

What makes Laribee's remix rhetoric particularly interesting is how *Saved by the bell hooks* mashup memes popularize feminist theory for public circulation. Vijay K. Bhatia writes, "Popularizations . . . are by far the most prolific category in which we find large-scale appropriations of disciplinary discourses for information or entertainment purposes in public space."<sup>22</sup> Sheridan et al. explain the importance of considering memes as a public genre for popularization: "If we place circulation at the center of rhetorical theory, the essay or speech cease to be privileged genres; proverbs, aphorisms, buttons, and stickers become preferred options."<sup>23</sup> Memes also become a preferred option as a genre when *circulation* (as opposed to *persuasion*, for example, the domain of public address studies in classical rhetoric<sup>24</sup>) moves to the center of rhetorical theory. After all, dominant publics and counterpublics are ultimately competing (but on unequal footing) for attention through circulation in order to establish a more expansive context for different audiences to further encounter and learn from their discourses. Jennifer Nish writes, "When individuals share a genre that demonstrates their relationship to an activist public, they engage in an uptake that asserts their individual agency by positioning themselves in relation to a collective."<sup>25</sup> She further explains how circulating a genre (like subversive political mashup memes) can potentially impact identity through attention to discourse: "As individuals choose to spread genres, their identities are also remade—or, perhaps more accurately, simply continue to be made in the never-finished process of identity making. Individuals who choose to take up a genre by spreading it perform acts of interpretation and meaning making."<sup>26</sup>

Laribee even experienced this transformative process during her creation of the memes. She writes, "[T]he longer I posted the more I began realizing that I loved seeing bell's wisdom interact with one of the most nostalgic, unexamined texts that I, and everyone I know, had ingested growing up."<sup>27</sup> She also tracks her memes in circulation to learn from them: "those [memes] were essentially like coded pieces of data, and being able to track their responses has been really helpful to me in terms of learning what are hotspot issues within the larger issue of race and class and gender."<sup>28</sup> Laribee takes full advantage of being able to analyze these "coded pieces of data" so that she can personally learn from them as well as critically and creatively use this knowledge to craft more effective remix rhetoric for her audiences.

Moving forward, I will analyze a small representative sample of the memes from *Saved by the bell hooks* to illustrate Laribee's subversive remix rhetoric, showcasing a wider variety of her memes and remix practices (although I do not wish to claim that these are her *only* practices). In

<sup>22</sup> Vijay K. Bhatia, "Genre as Interdiscursive Performance in Public Space," in *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, eds. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Sheridan et al., *The Available Means of Persuasion*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> For a critique of the limitations of Aristotelian persuasion, see: Arabella Lyon, *Deliberative Acts: Democracy, Rhetoric, and Rights* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 33.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Nish, "Spreadable Genres, Multiple Publics: The Pixel Project's Digital Campaigns to Stop Violence against Women," in *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, eds. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 244.

<sup>26</sup> Nish, "Spreadable Genres, Multiple Publics," 245.

<sup>27</sup> Liz Laribee, *The Lisa Problem*, *Saved by the bell hooks*, 29 January 2015, <http://www.savedbythe-bellhooks.tumblr.com/post/109547967363/the-lisa-problem>.

<sup>28</sup> Laribee, interviewed by Kyle Larson, March 18, 2016, transcript.

doing so, I also illustrate how Laribee's mashup memes evolved based on her reflection on the ethics of racial representation in her remix rhetoric. I conclude with some implications for public intellectuals who wish to respond to issues in public discourse.

### Subversive Remix Rhetoric in *Saved by the bell hooks*

Laribee's most widely circulated meme features an image still of Kapowski (on the left) interacting with an apparently unamused Lisa Turtle (on the right) in a movie theater (see Figure 2). The layered bell hooks quote on the image reads, "Black women felt they were asked to choose between a black movement that primarily served the interests of black male patriarchs and a women's movement which primarily serves the interests of racist white women." This meme's quote explicitly calls attention to Black women's reaction to white feminists and Black male patriarchs. But with the still image, it especially emphasizes the critique of white feminism.<sup>29</sup> Laribee discusses her rhetorical choices for this remix: "The picture I thought was effective because it sort of shows, . . . even in the context of like Kelly trying to interact with Lisa . . . there's no possible way for Kelly to represent Lisa in whatever it is that Kelly is trying to do here."<sup>30</sup> At this point in time on the 25th of May 2017, the post contains 98,318 notes of audience interaction through 'likes' and reblogs.<sup>31</sup> It illustrates her remix rhetoric's highly successful capacity for circulation. Laribee observes the common audience responses to this post: "[A] common quote I see on it is 'I'm going to reblog this every . . . time it comes up' or like 'This is me.'"<sup>32</sup> This rate of circulation and these responses verify that Laribee's remix rhetoric within this meme appeals to the knowledge of the feminist counterdiscourse community on Tumblr, a microblogging site known for feminist intellectual discourse, illustrating its credibility (*ethos*) according to Kuhn.<sup>33</sup> Laribee reflects on the meme's success: "That idea's popularity speaks to a failure on behalf of feminist and racial justice efforts in our history. Progress can't be made when the tools of that progress undermine the basic needs of the people it purports to aid."<sup>34</sup> Because of this popularity, she also came to realize her own privilege in not before recognizing the resonance this issue maintains within Black feminist communities.<sup>35</sup> That is, experiencing the ways in which people identified and interacted with the circulating meme drew her attention to the significance of its insight, thereby encouraging her to reflect further on it and become more conscious of it.

Most interestingly, Laribee recognizes and theorizes a potential problem with the ethics of racial representation in a remix rhetoric that would consistently use Turtle as the subject in these mashup memes. She calls it "The Lisa Problem."<sup>36</sup> In particular, the quote in Figure 2 functions as if it reflects Turtle's thoughts. Since Turtle is the sole woman of color on *Saved by the Bell*, Laribee

<sup>29</sup> To be clear, 'white feminism' doesn't necessarily mean "feminism practiced by white women." After all, Laribee is a white woman. One can be white and feminist, but not a 'white feminist.' Rather, white feminism is a particular form of feminist thinking and action that consciously or unconsciously upholds white supremacy for the expedient advancement of Western, white women. Of course, this strand of feminism marginalizes women of color. Even though white feminists would argue that they are fighting for the liberation of "all women," the ways in which their practices fail to account for intersectionality suggest otherwise.

<sup>30</sup> Laribee, interviewed by Kyle Larson, March 18, 2016, transcript.

<sup>31</sup> A user on Tumblr must reblog Laribee's post to comment on or respond to it.

<sup>32</sup> Laribee, interviewed by Kyle Larson, March 18, 2016, transcript.

<sup>33</sup> Kuhn, "The Rhetoric of Remix," Sec. 3.3.

<sup>34</sup> Collins, "An Exclusive Interview."

<sup>35</sup> Laribee, interviewed by Kyle Larson, March 18, 2016, transcript.

<sup>36</sup> Laribee, *The Lisa Problem, Saved by the bell hooks*, 29 January 2015, <http://www.savedbythe-bellhooks.tumblr.com/post/109547967363/the-lisa-problem>.



found that the consistent use of one woman of color to speak about issues of race risks becoming a “new form of tokenism.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, she didn’t want the consistent use of Turtle to imply that these issues at the intersections of race, gender, and class apply to every single Black woman in the same way. She states, “I don’t want Black women to become a stock character in how I talk about the world.”<sup>38</sup> This insightful acknowledgement and critical foresight speaks to the cautious approach to counter-public engagement in Laribee’s remix rhetoric. As a white woman, she must avoid the pitfalls of white feminism and be mindful of how circulating these memes could potentially affect the communities invoked in them, even and especially unintentionally. She demonstrates an astute awareness of intended and unintended consequences in the remix rhetoric of visual antinomy’s cultural production.

She developed two different rhetorical blogging practices to address ‘The Lisa Problem’ and avoid the risk of creating a “new form of tokenism” with her remix rhetoric. First, she branched out and created “sideshows” on *Saved by the bell hooks*. For instance, some of the sideshows include the following: “Cornel West Wing” (a mashup of Cornel West and *The West Wing*), “Brangela Davis” (a mashup of Angela Davis and the *Game of Thrones* character Bran Stark), and “Howard Xena” (a mashup of Howard Zinn and *Xena, the Warrior Princess*). The memes in these sideshows perform similar rhetorical practices as the ones performed by the *Saved by the Bell* memes. But the sideshows allow her to use *Saved by the bell hooks* as a platform to address a wider range of issues, incorporate different voices, and have a wider representative range of characters. Additionally, she began to use the quotes in a way that makes outside observations on the reality perpetuated by *Saved by the Bell*. She discusses wanting to “have the content or the words interact with the image in terms of . . . an observation. Like, there are a bunch of white people interacting and sharing this truth that . . . is separate from what it is we’re seeing happening on the screen.”<sup>39</sup>

Figure 3 is a good example of this practice of visual antinomy. It features a meme with a still image of Morris and A.C. Slater looking at each other while wearing military camouflage. The bell hooks quote layered on the image reads, “The rhetoric of nationalism is totally homophobic.” Morris and Slater embody a rhetoric of nationalism through their military camouflage attire, thereby potentially establishing a visual tension with the quote for the audience. This tension results from the ways in which the quote’s ideological perception interacts with and informs the norms of popular media represented in the still. In particular, the still image invokes—as indicative



Figure 2. Source: Laribee, Meme on Black Feminism.

<sup>37</sup> Laribee, surveyed by Kyle Larson, March 10, 2016, transcript.

<sup>38</sup> Laribee, interviewed by Kyle Larson, March 18, 2016, transcript.

<sup>39</sup> Laribee, interviewed by Kyle Larson, March 18, 2016, transcript.

in Larabee’s use of the hashtag “machismo”—generic connotations of patriarchal masculinity, patriotism, pride, power, strength, force, competition, etc. But as Kuhn notes, “One of the most interesting aspects of remix is its tendency to subvert the dominant discursive field and its reified genres.”<sup>40</sup> That is, the words in conjunction with the still image can produce an ideological tension for audiences that provokes a re-visioning of the dominant publics’ visual habits expressed in the popular media image.

Larabee challenges dominant visual habits to re-view the image outside of the show’s heteronormative patriarchal norms. As Brian Ray indicates in his discussion of parody trailers, subversive remix rhetoric “utilize[s] knowledge of how genres function through different semiotic channels and point[s] our attention toward larger structures and rules that shape our rhetorical behavior.”<sup>41</sup> In the context of Figure 3, Slater’s bare arms could no longer only suggest strength, but also perhaps eroticism, as he and Morris stand closely together making eye contact—while being careful to perform their patriarchal masculinities through power postures and homophobic touch isolation. Their eye contact could especially provoke a re-visioning. Whereas it could connote aggression as Morris and Slater stare each other down, one could re-vision the eye contact as a concerned Morris and a caring Slater intimately connecting with each other in a shared moment. Fleckenstein argues, “Through paradox, perceivers become intensely aware of the constructive nature of vision and of their participation in that vision.”<sup>42</sup> Paradox challenges individuals to hold a mirror up to their own ways of seeing, perceiving, and thereby understanding. The tension or paradox in Figure 3 places dominant perceptions in discussion with other ways of seeing and knowing. In doing so, the meme can reveal the existence of one’s learned visual habits to oneself and potentially subvert them if the person learns from the meme and continuously attempts to disrupt those habits over time.<sup>43</sup>

Figure 4 offers further illustration of Larabee’s subversive remix rhetoric. In this meme, one can observe a still image of Kapowski smiling while the accompanying bell hooks quote reads, “The beauty standard was a reflection of white supremacist aesthetics.” This meme’s juxtaposition talks back to the dominant visual habits of white supremacy through a critique of the white, Eurocentric beauty standards that Kapowski embodies. Its paradox results from the tension between the popular media’s generic norms of representation in the still image and the ideological perception advanced by the quote within the mashup. Kapowski arguably embodies an ideal Eurocentric beauty standard represented constantly in the popular media. In light of the quote’s insight, however, the meme exposes the beauty standard that privileges Eurocentric physical features as the

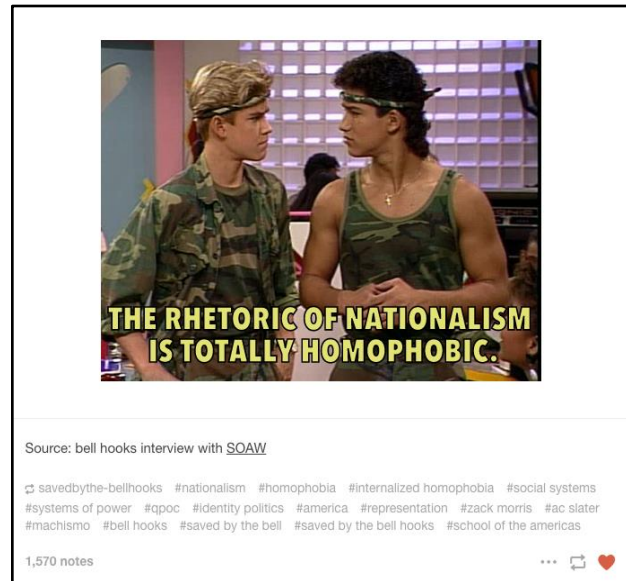


Figure 3. Source: Larabee, Meme on Nationalism.

<sup>40</sup> Kuhn, “The Rhetoric of Remix,” Sec. 5.4.

<sup>41</sup> Brian Ray, “More than Just Remixing: Uptake and New Media Composition,” *Computers and Composition* 30, no. 3 (2013): 187, doi: 10.1016/j.compcom.2013.07.003.

<sup>42</sup> Fleckenstein, *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action*, 119.

<sup>43</sup> Fleckenstein, *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action*, 127.



implicit default of what is considered beautiful and desirable. Laribee draws attention to dominant visual habits' manufacturing of a white supremacist beauty standard. If those who encounter this meme consequently foreground a reliance on both the visual habits of popular media and the perception of the quote when determining the meaning of the meme's whole composition based on the interaction between the two, then they could potentially better understand their own complacency in white supremacist aesthetic practices. Further, Laribee's use of an image of Kapowski smiling invokes an intersectional critique of white women's complacency with and even perpetuation of the white supremacist standard of beauty. Laribee reflects on white feminism and its oppressive practices: "White feminism is so puffed up. It's so proud because it posters as 'we're finally getting shit done,' and that can be so dangerous because there's such arrogance that goes along with that while . . . still shutting out Black women."<sup>44</sup> One can see that Figure 4 offers an intersectional critique of popular media and, through a smiling Kapowski, white feminists for complacency in and perpetuation of the role that white supremacy plays in dominant beauty standards. Therefore, the meme attempts to disrupt and subvert the standard of what is and isn't considered beautiful and for what reasons.

Overall, Laribee's remix rhetoric in *Saved by the bell hooks* is quite successful. As previously stated, it is Tumblr's 10<sup>th</sup> most viral blog for 2015,<sup>45</sup> having received 20,000 followers in a matter of days after its creation.<sup>46</sup> Individuals from the *YWCA of America*, *Insider Higher Ed*, *PennLive*, *Moxie*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Blavity* have interviewed Laribee about *Saved by the bell hooks*, and several other websites and publications have featured it. In *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman ultimately indicates six factors for viral success. These factors include: 1) positivity/humor; 2) provocation of high-arousal emotions; 3) packaging; 4) prestige; 5) positioning; and 6) participation.<sup>47</sup> *Saved by the bell hooks* arguably appears to fulfill all of these factors. It uses humor through the mashup itself while provoking high-arousal emotions by using quotes about racism, sexism, and classism and placing them in timely (*kariotic*) discussion with ongoing social and political issues. The blog's memes package the message simply by using a consistent generic style and single stills. Laribee positions them on Tumblr, which Shifman characterizes as a "meme hub."<sup>48</sup> It's also a platform known<sup>49</sup> for its counterpublic feminist discourse, as Laribee observes: "[A]nyone with access to Tumblr can encounter pockets of critical theory that might be able to



Figure 4. Source: Laribee, *Meme on Beauty Standards*.

<sup>44</sup> Laribee, interviewed by Kyle Larson, March 18, 2016, transcript.

<sup>45</sup> Tumblr, "Most Viral Tumblrs."

<sup>46</sup> Laribee and Henderson, "Hey Girl, I'm Saved by the bell hooks."

<sup>47</sup> Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014), 66-73.

<sup>48</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> For more discussion on why Tumblr is a platform with particularly counterpublic affordances, see: Marty Fink and Quinn Miller, "Trans Media Moments: Tumblr, 2011-2013," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 7 (2014): 611-626, doi: 10.1177/1527476413505002.

realign how we think about the world.”<sup>50</sup> She further explains, “[T]he way people tend to use Tumblr is the right fit for the content. Internet-based searches on Tumblr have become a valuable tool for young people hoping to educate themselves on how larger conversations are developing. It is fascinating to watch how memes both contribute to and reflect how people talk about things.”<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the memes appeal to prestige through the use of direct quotes from a celebrated feminist like bell hooks, and Laribee urges further participation by continuously recirculating a post that encourages her followers to read additional texts on intersectional feminism outside of the blog itself.<sup>52</sup> Shifman does warn that a heavy reliance on popular culture images for political memes risks depoliticizing the insights.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, this *feeling* of depoliticization might arguably be the point. After all, normalizing intersectional feminist perceptions and knowledges functions as a consciousness-raising means for developing oppositional discourses and identities.

### Implications for Academics in the Public Sphere

Laribee’s remix rhetoric for the *Saved by the bell hooks* project serves as a counterpublic model for social critique through knowledge mobilization, or “the process of moving knowledge from formal research into active use, a key value in the social and natural sciences in relation to public discourse.”<sup>54</sup> Although traditionally referenced in discussions about public policy, this concept is productive for thinking about how academic theory could circulate more broadly so that it better informs public discourse. This remix model challenges academics to rethink conventional forms of intellectual public engagement in order to reach broader public audiences. I believe this challenge offers hopeful opportunities for extending scholarly work in pursuing the (counter)public circulation of scholarship *with the same intellectual rigor* as the production of that scholarship. The popularization of scholarship can resist the uptake of academic genres, being fiercely counterpublic in order to experience a wider public circulation of academic theories. Popular culture can serve as a vehicle for intellectual public engagement. Packaging scholarly insights into memes—while certainly not the only genre for popularization—does challenge academics to pay more attention to style in their writing with a public audience and circulation in mind.<sup>55</sup> Laribee states that she looks for quotes that offer complete, digestible ideas in a short amount of space.<sup>56</sup> Scholars don’t necessarily need to fill academic publications with a style informed by bell hooks’ writing (although it would certainly be commendable to do so). But remixing scholarship into public texts and even using these texts to respond kairologically to social and political issues in public discourse could function *as extensions of scholarly work*. The texts would undoubtedly look different than academic articles, for they must function differently. And I find that exciting for the future research and practice of remix rhetoric.

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<sup>50</sup> Collins, “An Exclusive Interview”; Laribee, surveyed by Kyle Larson, March 10, 2016, transcript.

<sup>51</sup> Laribee, surveyed by Kyle Larson, March 10, 2016, transcript.

<sup>52</sup> Laribee, *Intersectionality*, Tumblr, September 24, 2016, <http://www.savedbythe-bellhooks.tumblr.com/post/150892453433/intersectionality>.

<sup>53</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 138.

<sup>54</sup> Tosh Tachino, “Multiple Intertextual Threads and (Un)likely Uptakes: An Analysis of a Canadian Public Inquiry,” in *Genre and the Performance of Publics*, eds. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 179.

<sup>55</sup> I do not wish to imply that academics don’t pay attention to their writing style. For, such an accusation would be demonstrably false. I simply wish to suggest that certain factors such as packaging complete ideas that can stand alone into short, digestible sentences would help direct their attention when it comes to stylistic concerns.

<sup>56</sup> Laribee, surveyed by Kyle Larson, March 10, 2016, transcript.