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On Being a "Good Girl" and on Doing Good

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Abstract: In this essay, the author grapples with how to navigate expectations of a "right way" to be a feminist when the jumbled and shifting realities of our personal and professional lives sometimes ask for us to adjust the dial based on the rhetorical situation. What if "loud" and "quiet" or "radical" and "enough" were seen as coalitional: both/and instead of either/or? At the same time, how do we know when we're adjusting the volume based on our exigence and audience and not because it's easy or comfortable? She considers how *being* good and *doing* good has too often been convoluted by and for white women and unpacks the ways the scripts of how to be a good girl and how to be a good feminist can keep us talking the talk more than walking the messy walk.

Keywords: good girl, white feminism, sororities, coalitional feminism

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We cannot keep pulling each other's feminist cards because of our contradictions.

--Brittney Cooper

I sat at a round table near the far edge of the room with one of my doctoral advisees for Lisa Melonçon's plenary talk on quiet feminism at the Feminisms and Rhetorics 2019 Conference at James Madison University. I'd traveled from Fort Worth where just the month before Atatiana Jefferson, age 28, was shot inside her home by a police officer. I'd participated in a small but mighty protest on my campus, one zip code away. This was six months before COVID took us all inside and Breonna Taylor, 26, was shot inside her home in Louisville, Kentucky.

I listened to Melonçon's keynote with interest due to my own research on women identifying across a range of feminist sensibilities (or declaring they weren't feminist) as well as personally trying to figure out how to be a better ally as a teacher, colleague, and citizen. I recall little about the talk itself except what Patricia Fancher posted on Twitter:

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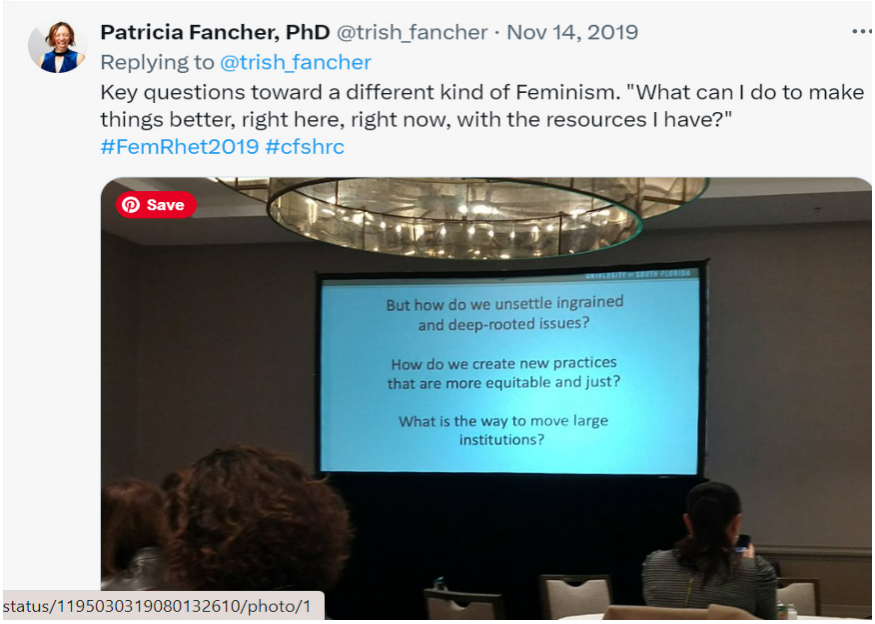

Figure 1: a photograph taken at a conference presentation room. The lighting is dim, but a large chandelier hangs from the ceiling. We can see the backs of several attendees' heads and a slide on a projection screen with three questions, which are listed below.

The three questions from Melonçon's slide: "But how do we unsettle ingrained and deep-rooted issues? How do we create new practices that are more equitable and just? What is the way to move large institutions?" I think these are thoughtful, ambitious questions. I later learned in Michelle F. Eble's Twitter response to Melonçon's talk that Erin A. Frost's term "apparent feminism" in technical communication seems relevant here:

> a methodology that seeks to recognize and make apparent the urgent and sometimes hidden exigencies for feminist critique of contemporary technical rhetorics. It encourages a response to social justice exigencies, invites participation from allies who do not explicitly identify as feminist but do work that complements feminist goals, and makes apparent the ways in which efficient work actually depends on the existence and input of diverse audiences. (5)

Sitting in that room, the title, "Quiet Feminism" didn't spark rhetorical listening. Many in the audience pushed back, and their questions felt right and made so much sense. Quiet suggests complicit, just like silence (see writer and philosopher Julian Baggini's thoughts on this). Or quiet can be timid and slow, and the stakes are too high for that. Or quiet is more available for those who are privileged and not being harmed. Quiet can be these things, and we should work hard against that kind of quiet. But quiet isn't always an unwillingness to do good. It might be trying to move the needle with those who will shut down and dig in their heels otherwise.

I have an acquaintance who on Facebook consistently said dismissive things about a huge swath of the country during an election season. I asked what kind of reaction she got from her online friends. She

explained that she didn't have any who weren't "blue staters." I couldn't help but think: it's a lot more comfortable acting boldly when you know you don't have to persuade anyone.

I remember thinking after the keynote that I should be quiet (!) on seeing some value to the notion of (albeit poorly named) quiet feminism. I worried my feminist card would be pulled, à la Brittney Cooper's epigraph above. Yet I eagerly submitted to this special issue call to explore how we exist as feminists in the field and in our lives on multiple fronts to do the coalitional work of feminism. I'm not focusing here on whether we identify as feminist, as Roxane Gay so accessibly did in *Bad Feminist* a decade ago, but the exigence is in the same realm. She addresses the ways she didn't fit the reductive perception of feminism (one she used to hold herself). Her book explores how "bad feminism" is really a nuanced feminism that comes from not having what seems the "good" or "correct" response.

Gay didn't always feel that feminism spoke for her, as feminism has repeatedly failed "women of color, queer women, and transgender women" and that "for years, I decided feminism wasn't for me as a black woman, as a woman who has been queer identified at varying points in her life, because feminism has, historically, been far more invested in improving the lives of heterosexual white women to the detriment of all others" (xiii). I'm a white, cis, straight, feminist who knows and is complicit in this history, striving to be a better-educated ally, which I define as someone who supports and boosts those marginalized individually and systemically. Sometimes my rhetorical situations involve those who haven't embraced any kind of feminism, let alone problematic white feminism. Quiet/apparent/subtle feminisms can be a way to move the needle.

Relatedly, Gay's book is grappling with seeking to live as a feminist rather than meeting some kind of feminist ideal. As she explains, "feminism is flawed because it is a movement powered by people and people are inherently flawed. For whatever reason, we hold feminism to an unreasonable standard where the movement must be everything we want and must always make the best choices" (x). She goes on to add: "the problem with movements is that, all too often, they are associated only with the most visible figures, the people with the biggest platforms and *the loudest, most provocative voices*" (x, emphasis added). For Gay, known as one of the keenest cultural critics on gender and race, it was the loudest voices that overdetermined what feminism was and how to be a feminist that initially led her to resist feminism.

I approach the issue here from a different perspective as someone who embraces feminism and had to learn that *being* good as a feminist is different than *doing* good as one, and this plays out in many ways that I explore in personal and professional contexts. Our feminist work can happen through doing good in multiple ways—small, grand, subtle—that move our collective project forward.

Teasing Apart Being Good and Doing Good: Learning Ways To Be Feminist

I lived in such a small town in the 1980s that in junior high we were automatically on the volleyball and basketball teams. In two years of playing basketball, reaching a bit higher than my opponent for a jump ball was my biggest accomplishment. My tall, blonde coach told my parents at conferences, "I can't say much about your daughter's athletic ability, but she's the only one who gets along with every junior high girl." I was a neutral space amid mean girl drama. After I could opt out of sports in high school to be the basketball statistician, on the sidelines but still in the mix, and later when I held jobs and started navigating adulthood, the trait of getting along with everyone became a source of pride. Until it didn't.

Up until I found feminist theory and history in graduate school over two decades later, I didn't see signals that it was anything but good to *be* good and to be liked and to be a peacemaker. I know now that this is the luxury of my whiteness, this privilege to sidestep discomfort. I'd also had good training in making others comfortable, I learned. In my PhD coursework, I was assigned Margaret Finders' *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*. I realized I'd been a "spacer," or what one teacher called the girls in the room she seated between the boys: "naughty boy, spacer, naughty boy, spacer. It's terrible but it's what you have to do to survive" (Finders 124). I didn't know my presence, ponytailed girl with an overbite, was orchestrated in that way in elementary school, but I do know that many women still become or are made spacers to make others' paths easier or faster or brighter.[1] Being good can be a code for how women should placate or reward civility masked as a way to hamstring women. But I want to reclaim the notion of spacer not as one who is positioned by others and rewarded for being docile but a role one instead takes on themselves to create a space to maneuver in different rhetorical situations.

To be the kind of "good girl" rewarded in a patriarchal society means to follow and maintain the status quo, but to be a "good woman" in feminist communities means to undo that: to speak out, and speak up. (Cue America Ferrera's monologue from *Barbie* here.) Sometimes volume becomes a barometer for effectiveness for and commitment to change. The jumbled and shifting realities of our personal and professional lives sometimes ask for us to adjust the dial based on the rhetorical situation. What if "loud" and "quiet" or "radical" and "enough" were seen as coalitional: both/and instead of either/or? But how do we know when we're adjusting the volume based on our exigence and audience and not because it's easy or comfortable? We can't always, but I want to consider how *being* good and *doing* good has too often been convoluted *by* and *for* white women (and perhaps others, though I want to stay in my lane with the examples and my own experiences I draw from). What if sometimes the scripts themselves get in the way (this is how to be a good girl, this is how to be a good feminist), and keep us talking the talk more than walking the messy walk?

Too often, we shortcut our positionality markers, but I pause to share a few glimpses behind the

1 Another twist: Academia is still full of spacers; I can't count the times I've answered an email or taken on a task that a less responsive or less generous [usually male] colleague didn't. In those moments I'm not silent, but I do feel complicit in contributing to a patriarchal system. At the same time, in those moments I seek to support—not serve—others where I have the institutional heft to do so, like grad students or contingent faculty.

scenes of my labels as white, cis, straight girl from the Plains and how that informs, aligns, and pushes against the intellectual work of feminism. In short: we can't ignore our lived realities and how we navigate those in our rhetorical sphere. In my case, as a white girl-then-woman, being good (compliant for others) and doing good (working to create better for all) has been difficult to detangle. I was a spacer in fulfilling cultural scripts of (white) womanhood like the legacy of the cult of true womanhood, scripts also well learned by my parents. My parents had been settling into married life and parenting their first child in the late 1960s, witnessing the volatile decade from their tv screen. They weren't Boomers but the Silent generation, known for civility and playing it safe. Not only was my family risk-averse, we were literally in the middle and not where the media told me the action happened—I spent my childhood in Minnesota, North Dakota, and then rural Nebraska. The first Black person I spoke to was another child at the roller-skating rink in Fargo; I was about eight, and he was probably a year or two younger. He was small and I felt protective of him after I built up the courage to say hello before we skated beside each other. Even then I think I understood on some level that this fascination with meeting a Black person was wrong. But I had, along with half of the United States, recently seen *Roots*, and I was horrified with what I learned about what white people did to Black people. Maybe I was virtue signaling even then, talking to the boy at the roller-skating rink and later asking for (and receiving) a Black Barbie for my birthday.[2] My reaction may have been part earnestness in wanting to show—and tell myself—that I knew right from wrong, that I wasn't one of the bad white people. Being good and doing good were conflated then. Doing good was keeping a small boy company who I worried others might not be kind to.

Issues became thornier when I saw conflicting messages about being good (behaving as maintaining a wrong status quo) with doing good (acting out for a greater good). In high school in the 1980s, I became engrossed with learning about the turmoil of the 1960s—civil rights marches, flashes of Woodstock, scenes from Vietnam protests on campuses. My mom had gone to Kent State, although it was before the 1970 National Guard shooting. This was more a skidding over of cultural moments than hearty intellectual work, high schooler that I was. I see now it was partly a fascination with those who weren't rule followers, who pushed back for what was just. They were *doing* good by not *being* good in the ways I'd been rewarded as a spacer. I sat in my bedroom and listened to Peter, Paul, and Mary. I'd wonder what I'd have done had I been on a college campus at that time—would I have rallied for what was right, or would I have watched, awed at bravery from the sidelines but afraid to join in as a rule follower and good girl? These seemed the only two choices.

A Spacer Turns Researcher

The tensions surrounding being good and doing good have been prevalent in my research in how and whom I study, in seeking to understand how we do and don't make moves to forward all women. I've studied older, rural, white women and National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) (read: "historically" white) sorority

2 I mean here the original Black Barbie, still saved in my mementoes. During a revision of this piece in June 2024, the documentary *Black Barbie* premiered on Netflix and shows the Black women who pushed to create her and the import of the representation to Black girls and women.

women. Though different populations, they generally don't take on the label feminist, falling between the cracks of academic conversations on gender and feminism and/or have tenuous relationships with feminism. My goal is to complicate assumptions about them without glorifying or vilifying them. To do good here from a researcher's perspective is to render a more nuanced portrayal of women without simply replicating and centering an uncritical whiteness.

Jacqueline Jones Royster's codes of cultural conduct in her 1996 CCCC Chair's address, "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own," are a guide to doing good in our research:

> If we can set aside our rights of exclusivity in our own home cultures, if we can set aside the tendencies we all have to think too narrowly, we actually leave open an important possibility. In our nation, we have little idea of the potential that a variety of subjectivities—operating with honor, respect, and reasonable codes of conduct—can bring to critical inquiry or critical problems. What might happen if we treated differences in subject position as critical pieces of the whole, vital to thorough understanding, and central to both problem-finding and problem-solving? (33-34)

Royster brings compassion and generosity to a critical eye. When I chose to write about NPC sorority women, I felt ambivalence because of imagined or real pushback for focusing on organizations who aren't feminist and have a history of exclusion based on race, religion, and class. And yet: my interest in studying them was to examine how those ideologies function rhetorically within this system to which five million women belong, how ideas of womanhood and whiteness are shaped.

For me, studying organizations that are pro-woman but do all they can to avoid the term feminist meant examining diluted ideas of feminism about promoting women's individual empowerment but not seeking equality for all. These feminisms appear to eschew being good as complying to the patriarchy, celebrating instead boldness and speaking out but without doing good to uplift all women. Many mark the late 1980s to early 1990s, the end of the Reagan/Bush years, as the rise of "postfeminism," the kinds of feminism found in mainstream culture discussed by Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, and Camille Paglia (all white women), and erupting during a time when women's power was more visible in popular culture but women were also met with great scrutiny. Most agree that postfeminism or power feminism puts more focus on the individual rather than the collective and syncs up with capitalism and neoliberalism. Catherine Rottenberg points to the ideas forwarded by Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 bestseller *Lean In* that invoked "a new feminist vocabulary, where happiness, balance and 'lean in' were replacing key terms traditionally inseparable from public feminist discussions and debates, namely, autonomy, rights, liberation and social justice" (qtd. in Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 7). It's all about empowerment of self, not a collective lifting up of others for social justice, speaking out to claim voice or space unlike the speaking out expected of allies to those who are marginalized. Rather than a quiet or subtle feminism, it's loud and bold, the volume up to perform, but not for doing good for all women.

I've consumed and been consumed by these feminisms; white feminism is a more palatable, mainstream feminism. I found feminist theory in graduate school in the last half of the 1990s. Not surprisingly, the feminism I learned was taught by white, second-wave feminists even as my feminist theory or rhetoric classes also taught womanism, fractures in white and Black feminisms, racist constructions and policing of Black women's bodies, LGBTQ voices, and indigenous ways of knowing. Still, white feminism persisted by Rafia Zakaria's definition of a white feminist is "someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played and continue to play in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas, and beliefs as being those of all of feminism and all of feminists" (vii). Kyla Schuller supplies a useful historical framework:

> For nearly two hundred years, a large and vibrant tradition of white women has framed sex equality to mean gaining access to the positions historically reserved for white middle-class and wealthy men. The goal, for these feminists, is to empower women to assume positions of influence within a fundamentally unequal system. Many of these feminists even argue, explicitly or implicitly, that their whiteness authorizes their rights. They weave feminism, racism, and wealth accumulation together as necessary partners, a phenomenon that has a tidy name: white feminism. (2)

Schuller's book is focused on how this has played out historically in the U.S. She traces how key figures from nineteenth- to twenty-first-century U.S. history were white feminist activists who not only ignored intersectionality but actively tamped down sisters of color. In each chapter she shows the ways "white feminism is an active form of harm, not simply a by-product of self-absorption" (4). What Schuller calls a counterhistory alerts readers who have been exposed to mainstream, feminist histories the ways some of the most lauded, visible activists were damaging to women of color, even as they did other important, activist work.

First- and second-wave white women feminists who seem to get the most acclaim were activists: putting themselves on the line, Alice Paul radicalism. *Well-behaved women rarely make history.* The racism of first-wave feminists is increasingly visible to those who've had the luxury of not paying attention, and stories occluded are being revealed. Journalist Sydney Trent shares how founders of Black sorority Delta Sigma Theta marched on March 3, 1913, on Pennsylvania Avenue the night before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. "Segregated in the back of the suffrage parade by its white organizers, the Deltas and other African American women were pioneers in paving the way for future Black political activism" (Trent). They weren't in the program, Trent explains:

> As organizing for the March 3 parade got underway, led by 28-year-old Alice Paul, [Ida] Wells-Barnett was forbidden to march with the all-white Chicago delegation out of fear that her presence would offend Southern women. The fiery crusader, her 60-member strong suffrage club and the other African American activists were consigned to bring up the rear.

Women like Paul weren't being good girls by patriarchal standards, but they also weren't forwarding a full feminist project to do good for all women. In short, loud isn't always good. Good isn't always loud. And someone like Paul is deemed too feminist or not feminist enough, depending on the feminist cards being checked.

Small Changes: Reading the Room

So many of us working to do good can fall short. I sought to reach both feminist scholars and sorority women—sometimes feminists, often not, yet championing women at every turn. I was trying to reach across the aisle in an effort to do some good through useful, fresh understanding. At the same time, I worried I'd be dismissed by the very readers I wanted to reach, those on either side of a feminist gulf.

One of the recruitment (then known as rush) advisors I knew when I was an undergraduate in an NPC sorority said when we were preparing for recruitment: "some are flowers, and some are pots." She meant that some women are best equipped—through appearance and social skills—to woo for our chapter and that others are…less so. I was to delegate accordingly as Rush Chair. The statement itself is ugly in the context it was used, but I think of that metaphor in other contexts now. I'm a much better pot than a flower who's bigger and bolder. Is that quiet feminism? Subtle feminism? I hope to be a productive spacer—not functioning solely as a buffer for others but seeking to do good at a lower frequency.

I also know that as a pot, and a white pot at that, I can sometimes cross the aisle to try to make a shift. During a visit with my parents around 2015 or so, Fox News was finding extreme bathroom examples to ignite transphobia around bathroom bills. My mom and I were in the living room, chatting it up as we always did. She'd just read a long profile in the *Lincoln Journal-Star* about a high school student who was trans and enduring policies about single-sex bathrooms at school. It was this youth's life story and struggle they faced using the bathroom for gender assigned at birth that made my mom question the news she was seeing. We talked about the piece, and she said, "I hadn't thought about how hard it would be for someone in that position." I talked about a friend of mine raising a trans daughter and kept the issue close to personal stories. She was rhetorically listening, and she felt open to speaking with me knowing I was a safe space—a new kind of spacer—even if we didn't agree on some issues. It felt like a small-change moment.

In *White Sororities*, I describe a volume of a national NPC sorority magazine (members of each organization are subscribed for life) published in 1992 that included candid discussions about sexual assault. It was, in the context of publications that were often epideictic enterprises, progressive. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Greek-life organizations were facing huge resistance. One collegian in *Kappa Alpha Theta Magazine* writes how one of the fraternities they were due to have a mixer with were singing a song at a football game with sexually lewd and demeaning lyrics. They canceled their mixer with them and asked them to quit singing the song at football games. The fraternity agreed. The sorority member and author of the piece, Becca Foote, crystalizes the rhetorical situation wisely, acknowledging: "as a women's organization, my chapter

feels strongly that we must protect our interests as women. Yet as a women's fraternity, we feel we must protect our interests as Greeks. Over the past few years, we have become increasingly aware of the fact that these interests often clash" (10). She describes the stakes:

> We did not wish to punish or humiliate the men by reporting them to the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs or the Judicial Inquiry Officer. We also did not want to give our school newspaper another opportunity to ruthlessly slander the Greek system. But we did want to make them aware of the powerful message they were sending to the women on Penn's campus. How could we do this without seeming self-righteous and alienating ourselves from the fraternity? (10)

Foote and her sisters made efforts to take the men to task, to call out sexism, and these are significant in a patriarchal context. They acted, though they didn't want to destabilize the system. And yet they recognize and try to call out a problem in a noteworthy way.

The women were praised for taking action. Next to Foote's piece in the magazine was a statement from Minnesota Senator David Durenburger lauding the Thetas for not going to parents or the law but "appeal[ing] to higher values and us[ing] the consciousness of the community as a moral voice" ("From the Congressional Record" 11). These Thetas did a good thing, and it's more than the Greek-life culture asked of itself then (and often even now). They did it in the confines of their rhetorical situation, and they were lauded for it. They respected women and each other, and they made a small gesture. They were asked by the fraternity to participate in a workshop to help educate their brotherhood, relying on women to do the labor that the men should take on. Foote ends her piece:

> As our nation becomes more aware of pressing issues such as sexual harassment, hazing and alcohol abuse, the Greek system has justifiably been called into question. As fraternities continue to be brought up on charges for such abuses, the demise of our system becomes almost inevitable. Should Greek women support their Greek brothers by remaining silent and watching their fraternities go one by one? Should Greek women ignore the problem because they aren't willing to give up the social opportunities that fraternities offer? What we must realize is that we are not supporting fraternities by sitting quietly on the sidelines. Instead, we must support them by working with them to educate ourselves so that we can salvage a system, which in my opinion, is well worth preserving. (10)

It's naïve and hopeful to assume that these acts could snowball and keep moving things forward. This was written over thirty years ago, and so much hasn't changed but also so much has. It's not enough, but it's something. It's not enough to settle there, but I don't want to write off women like Foote, either. I want her moment of doing good to be something to build from, not something to write off or worse, belittle.

Doing Good by Moving Forward

A last moment from the NPC sorority research: the national sorority magazines talked about suffrage. In April 1913 The Pi Beta Phi *Arrow* reprinted Carrie Chapman Catt's speech on the enfranchisement of women. She was a member at Iowa State, later following Susan B. Anthony as President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and helped organize the International Women's Suffrage Alliance. She, like so many white suffragists, exhibited racism. Journalists and researchers describe her as not racist to terribly racist and all between.

Catt was a bold voice in the feminist movement. The issue seems to be not whether she made strong contributions—did good work—but whether she should be framed as a hero. These, apparently, were the only two options. A story in *The New York Times* reveals that Iowa State renamed a building for her in 1996, followed by controversy. Yet twenty-six of twenty-seven women (all white from what I can glean) in the Iowa legislature signed to keep the building with her name while the president of the local NAACP, George Jackson, said, "The university needs to publicly acknowledge that sometimes good people can do bad things," and that the building name should be changed ("Suffragette's" 30).

I share the example of Catt not because of the building name and how she is—or should be—remembered, but because using Catt as a teachable moment is doing good and continuing feminist work. The *Times* article ends with the voice of a Black student at Iowa State:

> But Ms. Wondwosen, one of 660 blacks on the campus of 24,000 students, said Mrs. Catt did not work for change, either. "Women of color couldn't vote in the South until 1964," she said. "So I would say if she were still alive, what did you do after 1920 to guarantee that women of color could vote? She didn't do anything." (30)

Wondwosen tells us a way for white women to do good: to always be thinking of the next step and who was overlooked and how we can do more. Of course, a Black woman shouldn't have to do the labor of pointing this out for white women. Still, she gets to the heart of doing good as *continuing to move forward*. This can mean not gauging progress as only how fast and bold but for the most good for the most people, particularly marginalized people. [3] I say this not easily but with a renewed sense of not patting ourselves on the back for what feels like doing good and then considering the work done. I'm not suggesting that slow or subtle is better—we know that the idea of proceeding slowly is also a way to lapse into white comfort—but that it can be an effective approach for moving forward, so that we come at change from a both/and and not either/or stance.

Near the end of *White Sororities* I note that while I'd like to say I'm like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, I'm more like Amy Klobuchar. But I should have named Katharine Hayhoe instead; that's who's aspirational

3 Thank you to Mohammed Iddrisu for the ideas from a lunch conversation that helped me think about these ideas

to me. She's a well-renowned and well-known climate scientist who teaches at Texas Tech and devotes much of her time trying to reach evangelicals to understand and accept climate change. Her husband is a pastor, and in addition to publishing in her field, she spends a good deal of her time crossing the aisle, publishing op-eds, and seeking to reach skeptical audiences.[4] She seeks environmental justice; her cheery and open face and demeanor never neglect the gravity of her mission. She is doing good in a way that doesn't fit an iconic feminist image of a strong activist but is reaching out for solidarity. I don't operate like AOC does in my world for a number of reasons, but I'm grateful as hell for her voice, just as I am for Hayhoe's. We need both to have the most rhetorical impact. Hayhoe models that instead of wasting precious time looking back over our shoulder to see if someone is waiting to pull our feminist card, we can move forward in many ways, even if modest, like talking to a parent about bathroom bills. But instead of patting ourselves on the back, we roll up our sleeves and ask, *what's next?*

4 (See Bethany Mannon and Megan Von Bergen's "Talking Climate Faith: Katharine Hayhoe and Christian Rhetoric(s) of Climate Change," *enculturation: Rhetorics and Literacies of Climate Change*, Fall 2020, for much more on this)

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