What’s the matter with representation? Feminism, materialism, and online spaces

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Abstract

This paper considers the issue of digital/online political activism and argues for its re-appraisal as a form of political engagement. It begins by sketching out certain feminist attachments to material politics over symbolic, representational issues, and to specific political methods. This is then linked to more recent critiques of neo-liberalism and its perceived impact on feminism, critiques that have shaped some feminists’ suspicion of digital activism; I use the Australian media commentator Helen Razer as an exemplar of this perspective. The final section outlines some conceptual tools for assessing digital activism, and the importance of such re-evaluations.

Introduction

This paper takes as its starting point my reading of the work of the Australian media commentator Helen Razer, particularly her approach to feminism. By reflecting on what I see as the limitations of her approach, I consider the problem of how to assess forms of online, or digital, activism, in a specifically feminist context. This line of inquiry builds on my previous (doctoral) research, in which I examined the ways that feminism has variously understood the relations between culture/representation, and the material/social. How these relations are conceived can have significant effects on how feminist politics and activism are understood, particularly in relation to online spaces, political uses of social media, and digital activism.

This paper examines these issues, first by exploring the notion that contemporary feminism has been co-opted – or ruined – by neoliberalism. I aim to show how this claim has shaped the conception of online political activism: as ineffective, hyper-individualist, and overly focused on cultural
issues. While I wish to avoid idealising digital activism, I nevertheless maintain that it would be a mistake – and a loss – to dismiss it as simply another manifestation of neoliberalism’s influence and reach. To make this argument, I begin by briefly describing certain feminist attachments to material politics over symbolic, representational issues, and to specific political methods; attachments that are linked to a broader tradition of “left melancholy” (Benjamin 1974). This offers a useful framework for exploring the idea that progressive materialist politics has been compromised by an over-emphasis on cultural and symbolic issues, as well as the claim that neoliberalism has ruined feminism. I then examine how the Australian writer Helen Razer exemplifies such approaches, and by locating her work within the traditions of pessimistic assessments of feminism’s impact and left melancholy, I hope to illustrate how specific foundational commitments to feminism’s ‘proper’ objects and ‘proper’ methods necessarily place limitations on how to understand new forms of political engagement – which digital activism undoubtedly is. The final section then explores a number of ways in which Razer’s position can be disputed. For example, online activism can and does have ‘offline’ effects; and further, the distinction between online and offline is not always sustainable or even desirable. I argue that digital feminist activism should be understood as a uniquely appropriate way of responding to the changing terrain of politics within neoliberal societies, and that this requires thinking of digital activism not in terms of opposition to neoliberal forms of governance, but as a modality of resistance that operates within and through them.

‘Left melancholy’, post-structuralism, neoliberalism, and feminism

Lamenting the loss or failure of feminism is certainly not new. Mainstream media has regularly featured stories on the failure, or death, of feminism, particularly since the ‘second-wave’ of the 1960s and 1970s; and within feminist scholarship, such questions have revolved around whether feminism has been compromised or corrupted through its engagements with other areas of knowledge. Insofar as feminism is part of ‘the left’ more generally, it has also been affected by currents of ‘left melancholy’ and loss; the perception of late 1960s-early 1970s counter-culture as a golden moment of political activism, and as a reference point against which all subsequent left-wing political activity is dolefully measured. As Wendy Brown describes ‘left melancholy’, it is an “epithet for the revolutionary hack who is, finally, attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing
possibilities for radical change in the present” (1999, 20; see also Hemmings 2005, 134 note 22; Bell 2002, 578). Indeed, for Brown, if the left insists on adhering to principles and techniques specific to one historical period, then “it literally renders itself a conservative force in history” (25). Judith Butler echoes this view, arguing that “nostalgia for a false and exclusionary unity is linked to the disparagement of the cultural, and with a renewed sexual and social conservatism on the Left” (1998, 270). In drawing attention to ‘disparagement of the cultural’, Butler also signals how a focus on the material operates in discourses of ‘left melancholy’, a point that is also made by Brown when she objects to an insistence “on a materialism that refuses the importance of the subject and the subjective, the question of style, and the problematic of language” (1999, 24).

These themes have been particularly evident in discussions of the left’s relationship with post-structural theory. For example, feminist critics such as Martha Nussbaum have argued that post-structuralism functions as a pernicious and corrupting influence on feminism, with Butler’s work seen as epitomising these effects, by refusing to found itself upon a general subject category of ‘woman’; claiming to eschew normative criteria; interrupting linear or teleological visions of feminist progress; and valorising theory, language, and representation over politics, activism, and material issues (Nussbaum 1999; see also Herstein 2010; Thomas-Williams 2008; Wiegman 2010). In ‘The Professor of Parody’, Nussbaum charged Butler with over-emphasising the importance of texts, representations, and language, and therefore failing to offer concrete assistance to feminist objectives; for example, she argued that “[h]ungry women are not fed by this, battered women are not sheltered by it, raped women do not find justice in it, gays and lesbians do not achieve legal protections through it” (1999, 45). In this, Nussbaum echoed an earlier complaint by Mary Maynard against post-structuralism generally: “Not everything is sign or text, as any rape survivor, homeless person or starving child will testify. Such people experience ‘real’ phenomena with ‘real’ effects” (1995, 273). Nussbaum’s views were shared by many other feminist writers and scholars, such as Gisela Kaplan (1993), Susan Bordo (1993), and Susan Gubar (1998) (see also Giminez 2005; Miller 2008; Gunnarsson 2011; Maynard 1995).

The notion that post-structuralism’s attention to discourse, language, and the symbolic was superficial also led critics to argue that it distracted and seduced people away from politics ‘proper’. Nussbaum and others suggested that post-structural theorists enticed potential activists away
from real political work, onto the path of meaningless symbolic subversion (Barvosa-Carter 2001, 130; Bell 2002, 583; Herstein 2010, 48). Indeed, in an interview, Nussbaum argued that “Butler is like the Pied Piper leading all the children away! … If all these wonderful people drop out of politics, then there are that many fewer people left to fight against evil” (in Boynton 1999). Post-structuralism, in sum, was seen as obstructing feminism and distracting feminist scholars away from material political concerns.

While post-structuralism is an academic methodology, neoliberalism on the other hand is an ideology, initially rooted in economics, but expanding to encompass social and cultural concerns as well. While first articulated in the United Kingdom and the United States, it now has a global reach and influence, and the rise of neoliberal policies and programs has had serious economic and social effects. For example, as governments have increasingly withdrawn from services and care such as welfare and safety net provisions, these have been outsourced to private or semi-private organisations, with assistance no longer rendered as a basic human right but as a privilege bestowed by benevolent corporations (Prügl 2015, 616). While post-structuralism and neoliberalism are obviously not equivalent, functionally or definitionally, there are nevertheless significant parallels in how their respective impact on left-wing politics has been perceived. In the case of feminism, neo-liberalism, like post-structuralism, has been seen as co-opting, de-politicising, and distracting feminism.

Feminist scholars Nancy Fraser, Hester Eisenstein, and Angela McRobbie have offered significant contributions to this argument; their publications have been described as “exemplars of the latest instantiation of an ongoing feminist concern about the decline and depoliticisation of a previously vigorous and emancipatory collective struggle” (Eschle and Maiguashca 2014, 634). The confluence of feminism and neoliberalism elicits a form of nostalgia, or “yearning” as Elisabeth Prügl terms it (2015, 615), for earlier forms of feminism, in particular those defined as second-wave (Cullen & Fischer 2014, 287); and certainly, for writers such as Fraser and Eisenstein, second-wave feminism, understood primarily as a gendered critique of capitalism, has been co-opted, appropriated, even seduced, by neoliberalism. According to this view, feminism has consequently lost its grounding in material, class-based politics and hence its promise, as it is absorbed into neoliberal programs and policies (Prügl 2015, 618; Funk 2013, 181). In their examination of Fraser and Eisenstein’s work, Eschle and Maiguashca note that these authors “are wedded to a socialist/Marxist feminist analysis of gender oppression”
centred on economic factors as key to explaining and challenging gender inequality (2014, 636) and “impatience with what they see as a turn to culture and identity within feminism, a trend that both perceive to be a distraction from the main task of critiquing capitalism” (2014, 636). This summation is also an effective description of Australian writer Helen Razer’s position, and her criticisms of contemporary feminism.

Helen Razer and contemporary Australian feminism

In Australian media commentary, Helen Razer is an emphatic subscriber to the notion that neoliberalism has co-opted, even destroyed, feminism. Razer is a former radio announcer (on TripleJ FM), and now writes for a range of Australian publications including *Crikey*, *Daily Review*, *SBS Online*, and *The Saturday Paper*. Her writing covers an array of topics, including politics, popular culture, feminism, and even gardening; she also runs her own blog, *Bad Hostess*. Yet, while women such as Clementine Ford, Van Badham, and Mia Freedman have a recognisable feminist presence in the Australian context, Razer is not readily identifiable as part of this group. Indeed, she frequently positions herself as part of a minority feminism that remains committed to original principles, even in the face of significant opposition:

> the global community of non-liberal feminists is really that small... at some point in the last 20 years, being a feminist opposed to identity or representational politics became terribly unpopular. Like, way more unpopular and less profitable than being the sort of feminist who writes Why Women of Colour Have the Right to be Represented on *Game of Thrones* (2016e).

Fraser’s charge that contemporary feminism has turned to cultural issues at the expense of economic ones, thus “‘privileging recognition over redistribution’” (in Funk 2013, 186-7), is one that Razer would emphatically support. Indeed, her conception of proper objects and methods is shaped by her foundational commitment to Marxism:

> You can say for all you’re worth, ‘we live in a society, not an economy’, but you’d be a little bit of a dill. We only get to live in something that is more purely ‘social’ if the prevalent economic terms allow that pure freedom (2016b).
For Razer, meaningful and effective political methods must be firmly located in the material realm, and focused on macro-scale economic and structural change. Consequently, Razer’s definition of feminism, which she has reiterated on many occasions, is “the struggle against masculinised violence and feminised poverty. Or, the acknowledgement that physical violence is enacted disproportionately by men and poverty is experienced disproportionately by women. That’s it, really” (2013a). This traditional Marxist-feminist definition, in its insistence on violence and poverty as central concerns, explicitly evacuates issues of sexuality and representation from feminism, as not belonging to the material realm. Accordingly, Razer’s most common rhetorical tactic is the use of materialism as a kind of corrective, to counter what she perceives as an incessant focus on symbolic, representational issues in contemporary feminism (and progressive politics in general). The following excerpt exemplifies this:

Being miserable and confused, I never changed my Facebook avatar to support same-sex marriage on the grounds it would ‘stop youth suicide’. I don’t believe that the promise of a marriage certificate is a fraction as useful as adequate housing and mental health care in helping queer kids. Being miserable and confused, I never said I’ll Ride With You. I never thought that I could undo fifteen years of anti-Muslim state propaganda by making you listen to my dreary white girl conversation on a train (Razer 2016h; see also 2016c; 2016d).

This separation of the material and the symbolic, and the adherence to an ‘economic base’ framework as primary, is also evident when Razer’s attention turns to former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, or former US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (2016e). Mention of Gillard’s 2012 misogyny speech, for instance, inevitably spurs Razer to remind her readers that in that same week, Gillard’s government cut the welfare payments of over 100,000 single parents, most of whom were women (Cox, 2012).

Razer writes for mostly mainstream, popular publications, and is of course obliged to shape her arguments accordingly. Nevertheless, her rhetorical separation of ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ borders is reductive, and limits capacity to evaluate short-term, micro-scale political strategies. The ‘I’ll Ride With You’ campaign, for example, did not aim to “undo fifteen years of anti-Muslim state propaganda” – it was an impromptu exercise in public
safety and solidarity, as Australian Muslims using public transport experienced a sharp spike in harassment and intimidation in the aftermath of the Lindt Café siege in 2014. When Razer rejects culturally focused politics together with the significance and constitutive power of representation, campaigns that are centred on representational issues tend to be swiftly dismissed regardless of their efficacy or outcomes, and this is particularly pronounced when she discusses digital activism.

**Online feminism**

In responding to such perspectives, some feminists are in full agreement regarding the problematic nature of neoliberalism, but take issue with the claim that it has appropriated feminism (Funk 2013; Harris 2010). Annette Funk is especially critical of the unfavourable comparisons drawn between contemporary feminism and an earlier, “second wave” feminism, which is presented as primarily socialist or Marxist in its orientation (2013, 181, 184). Indeed, Funk maintains that second wave feminism was in fact predominantly liberal: invested in transforming laws and policies, but not opposed to the capitalist state in principle (2013, 181; Präg 2015, 618; Eschle and Maiguashca 2014, 639). For Präg, it is also worth noting that, in any case, feminist methods and strategies must re-fashion themselves as power and governance change (Prügl 2015, 615), and this is undoubtedly given extra urgency by the fact that (white, western) feminism is no longer a minority perspective situated entirely outside of prevailing systems of power. For these writers, the limitations and dangers of neoliberalism must be taken seriously, and a certain wariness regarding the points at which feminism intersects with neoliberalism is essential. However, it is equally important to avoid sweeping claims regarding the determinative power of neoliberalism, and the tendency to use it as a ‘blanket’ term for explaining social problems, or as a yardstick to assess or dismiss contemporary feminist engagements (Funk 190-2; Orloff and Shiff 2016, 126-7). Neoliberalism requires precise definition rather than “master variable” status (Prüg 2015, 616); as Prüg notes, it can be seen as an economic system, an ideology, and a mode of governmentality which prizes “individual freedom, choice, and empowerment” (2015, 620) and its effects may be unpredictable and inconsistent.

If contemporary feminism, as theorised along these lines, is not entirely captive to neoliberal ideology, then the increase in feminist digital and online engagement perhaps heralds a fourth wave of feminism (Munro
While this is a matter of ongoing debate, the significance of the internet to contemporary feminism is difficult to overstate (Casey 2016; Munro 2013). For example, one of the most significant and contentious effects of online engagement has been the emergence of “a ‘call-out’ culture, in which sexism or misogyny can be ‘called out’ and challenged” (Munro 2013, 23). Due to the nature of the internet itself, there are countless examples of ‘calling out’, and the issues identified as important are overwhelmingly diverse, ranging from campaigns against sexualised clothing for girls, criticisms or celebrations of various celebrities, the 2012 protests against 2GB announcer Alan Jones which saw the birth of the feminist Facebook group ‘Destroy the Joint’, and hashtags like #safetytipsforladies. (The ‘safety tips for ladies’ hashtag was inspired by social media users’ objections to anti-violence programs that consistently placed the responsibility for safety on to women themselves rather than their attackers. Like the ‘Destroy the Joint’ campaign, #safetytipsforladies was rapidly circulated, and characterised by mockery and humour [Rentschler 2015, 354-5].) Depending on one’s perspective, calling out can be viewed as a necessary and useful form of micro-politics (bearing traces of the view that the personal is political); as yet another manifestation of the hyper-individualism that is increasingly required of neoliberal subjects (Munro 2013, 23); or even as “meaningless outragegasm”, as Jane Gilmore describes it (in Casey 2016, 13).

Helen Razer’s view aligns firmly with the latter two perspectives. Indeed, ‘Destroy the Joint’ has been a particular target of her criticism, given that it frequently takes on matters of representation and is located online (McLean et al. 2016, 158). For Razer,

Destroy the Joint began, very quickly, to Destroy the Point ... The fast cycles of uncritical rage that greeted a number of purportedly “misogynist” incidents — the average comedy of Daniel Tosh, the dressing of children in inappropriate clothing, the naming of a racehorse as a woman — brought to mind the usual pace of my own visits to RedTube. We sit in front of screens and we suspend our thought to enhance our desire and then we mash our own genitals to the point they explode in a brief but ecstatic frenzy of nothing especially productive. It’s a sad little ragegasm we need to repeat seven times a day in the absence of genuine congress (2013a).

Razer continues this metaphor with a repudiation of ‘Destroy the Joint’ styled political engagement that directly parallels Nussbaum’s description of Butler as a Pied Piper distracting people from real politics:
I do not mind a good wank but I have little patience for a bad one and this mean and dessicated DTJ masturbation must, at some point, cease. The expense of this libidinal energy cannot be calculated. We are spending our climaxes in tiny online moments when, really, they are due elsewhere to fuck the system (2013a).

In sum, Razer’s specific theoretical framework limits her capacity – or willingness – to explore the possible effects of digital activism, which for her is merely an expression of neoliberal hyper-individualism. Yet, her refusal to concede that representations are in a sense material – and vice versa – limits the questions she can ask and the arguments she can make. In the next section, I therefore examine how digital activism might be assessed outside of such a framework.

**Re-thinking online politics**

As terms like ‘slacktivism’, ‘clicktivism’, and ‘hashtag activism’ suggest, political engagement online has been the subject of much cynicism along the lines expressed by Razer, with critics arguing that it achieves little beyond helping individuals feel good about themselves (Munro 2013, 24; Casey 2016, 3). As Julia Schuster notes, “like everyday feminism, online activism is often condemned wholesale as being a ‘lazy’ form of activism that has no impact on the ‘real world’” (2017, 7). Nevertheless, online activism does produce concrete results. For example, Ealasaid Munro highlights how “[s]everal large corporations [e.g. Facebook] have fallen foul of the speed with which feminist campaigns can garner support on the internet” (2013, 23). A number of online efforts by ‘Destroy the Joint’ have also achieved material outcomes (see McLean et al. 2016, table 1, for a detailed list); perhaps the most impressive of these was persuading Telstra to provide silent phone numbers free of charge for victims of domestic violence. Such responses counter criticisms of ‘slacktivism’ by demonstrating actual, ‘real-world’ results. Further, online actions are often connected with those offline, rather than being confined to the internet; in response to the charge that online activity is not ‘real activism’, some writers have pointed out that online and offline activism frequently function together, and inform each other, rather than being cleanly opposed or separate (Bonilla and Rosa 2009, 10; Loza 2014). Events such as Reclaim the Night, for example, now have a significant online presence – participation is not simply a single annual march but is ongoing (McLean and Maalsen 2013, 253). Overall, as Jessica McLean and Sophia Maalsen suggest, “considering the diversity of processes now
enacted in online places it is necessary to start framing the support of causes through social media not merely as activity but as activism” (2013, 249).

There is also a strong case to be made that digital activism is a material practice, and has material effects, rendering the assumed separation of online and offline unsustainable. In considering this further, feminist geography offers some useful conceptual tools. For example, McLean and Maalsen (2013) have used feminist geography to consider social media activism, with a particular focus on ‘Destroy the Joint’ and former PM Julia Gillard’s well-known misogyny speech. While they are careful not to overstate the potential of online activism, and retain a level of scepticism with regard to the internet’s democratic potential (2013, 245), McLean and Maalsen nevertheless identify social media as central to the recent ‘feminist revitalisation’ in Australia and elsewhere. Their geographical framework allows them to describe the ways that online “spaces circumvent and renegotiate traditional spatial dimensions” (2013, 243), and they make a strong case that online activism “despite its physical intangibility has very material effects” (253). Of particular interest is their application of Gillian Rose’s concept of ‘paradoxical space’ to encapsulate the way that social media redraws or troubles the boundaries between private and public. They combine this with David Morgan’s concept of ‘known strangers’ in describing the specific character of online interactions, especially on Twitter:

Social media operates in a space between public and private domains, a paradoxical space where ‘intimate’ confessions or conversations are forged without expectation of permanence. Importantly, **this semi-anonymity allows engagement in spaces which may otherwise be restricted.** The concept of ‘known strangers’ fits well with Rose’s (1993) ‘paradoxical space’ and reflects what is happening when social media become fora to develop political movements (2013, 244; emphasis added).

In this account, the temporary or fleeting nature of online interaction – its anonymous or semi-anonymous character, and its apparent dependence on the personal (those aspects that are also among the most derided) – together can generate an “unsettling space” which holds considerable promise for political action (2013, 252). Importantly, such paradoxical spaces are not somehow outside of or beyond power; they are more akin to “social spaces carved in the interstices or institutions and in the chinks
and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati” (de Lauretis in Desbiens 1999, 182).

The concept of “technics”, defined as “the problematic and constitutive relation between what we call ‘human’ and ‘technology’, and accordingly ‘technicity’ as the (emergent) qualities of that relation as it is performed” (Kinsley 2014, 371) is also a promising way of understanding the relations between digital space and materiality. As Samuel Kinsley observes, “in opposing ‘the virtual’ and ‘the real’, we either oppose technically mediated experience to other forms of experience or we oppose our technical life to other, apparently ‘natural’, forms of existence. Either way, we risk reasserting old, problematic binaries: human/technology and nature/society” (2014, 371). Concepts such as paradoxical space, and technics, can therefore offer powerful ways to reframe our understanding of online spaces and political activism.

However, rather than trying to show how feminist online activism is material (and by implication not simply part of neoliberalism), we might also examine how it functions within, but is not fully constrained by, neoliberal contexts. It is clearly essential to analyse the effects of neoliberalism, especially given its emphasis on the individual; for instance, to carefully scrutinise feminist “micro-rebellions” and consider if these inform or enable larger scale changes (Baer 2016). In seeking to understand the reach and influence of neoliberalism, however, we should also be careful not to assume its complete power. It is not a closed and perfect system. In this way, digital feminism could be seen not only as a partial product of neoliberalism, but also as an appropriate and effective response to it.

For example, through the concept of “precarity”, Hester Baer explores how the insecurity and paradoxes that are the hallmark of neoliberal society can also present opportunities (2016, 21). While precarity itself is not new, especially under capitalism, neoliberalism has “instrumentalised” it; further, the social mythologies that previously made social reality more palatable (e.g. “the good life”; “freedom and opportunity for all”) have lost potency. The resulting exposure of contradictions and inconsistencies at the heart of late capitalism therefore creates “ambivalence” (2016, 21), and it is here that potential can be found. Further, neoliberalism’s emphasis on individualism, self-responsibility, and self-production has foregrounded the body in new ways. While on one level, digital spaces are highly disembodied, bodies are at the same time a primary means of constructing the online self (2016, 19).
Through detailed examination of specific feminist campaigns that have a dominant online presence (SlutWalk; FEMEN; #Aufschrei; #YesAllWomen), Baer demonstrates how personal stories and experiences are explicitly connected to over-arching structural inequalities and collective issues; further, SlutWalk in particular operates across online and offline spaces. Such campaigns, which highlight the precarity of female bodies as sites of “subjection and resistance”, “literally redo feminism in a public context ... [and] actively renegotiate feminist politics for a neoliberal age” (2016, 29). Accordingly, Baer recommends that we avoid applying the kind of success/failure templates to feminist activism that may have been relevant to earlier, twentieth-century social movements but are less useful now. Here, while hitherto seen as supplementary at best to politics proper, micro-scale political action and forms of “unconventional activism” (Harris 2010, 481) are re-evaluated. Such reconsiderations allow that digital activism is different from previous forms of political engagement; offering new ways of inserting feminism into the public sphere (memes are just one example); allowing for concrete experiences of intersectionality in online spaces, and thus perhaps increased reflexivity; and finally, embodying a shift from legislative and state-based programs for change (Baer, 2016). Such observations indicate that different measures of evaluation may be required for assessment of digital politics.

Finally, there is evidence that social media has provided marginalised people with a platform to produce their own work. For example, women of colour are increasingly using social media to articulate and develop feminism on their own terms (Kendzior 2014; Kaba and Smith 2014; Park and Leonard 2014; Mann 2014; Thelandersson 2014; Loza 2014). Platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr in particular are vehicles for marginalised people to create content and to be seen, read, and heard. As Larisa Mann points out, this is especially significant given that traditional media outlets – and academia – offer little scope in this regard (2014, 294-5). Women like Sydette Harvey, Lauren Chief Elk, and Mikki Kendall among others have carved out a distinct public presence on Twitter and Tumblr, and given western feminism’s lengthy, difficult, and ongoing struggle with racism and ethnocentrism, the importance of this cannot be over-stated. As Susana Loza writes,

[i]s mainstream feminism destined to remain the terrain of white women? Or can the digital media praxis of women of color, their hashtag feminism and tumblr activism, their blogging and livejournaling, broaden and radically redefine the very field of
feminism? As I type these words, women of color are congregating in Google Hangouts and Skype, on Twitter and Tumblr (2014).

A number of writers have emphasised that use of digital technology has proved to be one way that people of colour can position themselves as subjects rather than objects to be known or studied (Saba and Smith 2014). Kendall summarises this with devastating simplicity: “women of color no longer need the platform of white feminism because they have their own microphones” (in Loza 2014). While Indigenous Australians’ use of social media remains comparatively low (Carlson 2016), there is evidence of similar trends emerging. For example, when the Western Australian government closed a number of remote Aboriginal communities, Michelle Breen noted that

[a]nother big difference between 2007 and now is the presence of social media as a news- and opinion-dissemination platform. Indigenous and non-Indigenous social media users concerned about the WA plans did not have to wait for the mainstream media to “allow” their contributions to be heard (2015).

Given the extent to which social media is being used by populations who lack a visible presence in traditional media, perhaps the ‘not real activism’ charge is not only inaccurate, but evidence of a disturbing attempt at policing boundaries. As Suey Park and David Leonard observe with reference to the so-called ‘Feminist Twitter Wars’,

[i]n a world where the voices of white middle-class heterosexual men and women are privileged, it is striking that Twitter, one of the few spaces that allows for counternarratives and resistance, is now facing a barrage of criticism … women of color are already excluded from major publishing platforms, but are reprimanded for using available platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr to write their own stories (2014).

Certainly, Sarah Kendzior has identified a shared tendency of repressive governments and white western activists to dismiss online activism: “Social media is viewed by gatekeepers as simultaneously worthless and a serious threat. Balancing these opposing views requires a hypocrisy that can be facilitated only by the assurance of power” (2014). Indeed, ‘simultaneously worthless and a serious threat’ is also a fitting description of how young women’s online presence tends to be perceived, from many political perspectives. As Harris notes, the numbers of younger women participating in and utilising Web 2.0 are exceptionally high, and deserve
sustained attention (2010, 479; see also Cullen & Fischer 2014, 287). Such observations question what is being lost, and who is being dismissed, when online activism is characterised simply as a manifestation of neoliberal dilution of political movements.

As the use of social media continues to grow, and as forms of digital activism expand (on all ‘sides’ of politics, it is important to note), it seems increasingly urgent and useful to consider online spaces as part of socio-political movements. In this paper, I have suggested that some of the mistrust of digital activism among feminists may stem from a well-placed suspicion of neoliberalism’s increasing reach and power, while also arguing that digital activism may not be fully constrained by this. This is not to imply that digital activism is a universal panacea or that it is necessarily superior to other forms of activism. However, it does seem clear that it is now part of the feminist ‘toolkit’ and therefore should be harnessed to our advantage. Perhaps the sheer diversity of feminist-identified campaigns on the internet is frustrating and disheartening only if feminism’s success is predicated on fixed principles and methods.

Feminist interventions or strategies are best understood by situating them in their specific contexts – as arts of living appropriate to their time and place. This allows an understanding of their strategic aims, an acknowledgement of their gains, and appreciation of their significance. This approach would mean that feminism is not permanently beholden to established methods, as in the work of Razer. Similarly, digital activism can be appreciated within its specific historical and social context – in Sarah Casey’s terms, as a “tool of the Zeitgeist” (2016, 5-6). Otherwise, we may be constraining the possibilities for feminist theory and politics.

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