

**Resisting Popular Feminisms:**  
**Gender, Sexuality and the Lure of the Modern**

**Abstract**

This article tracks discursive and political use of gender and sexual equality in nationalist and popular accounts of feminism, focusing on the ways in which such discourses produce a particular linking of time and space in the articulation of ‘the Modern’ in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. It further explores the increasing popularity of feminism in some media and celebrity contexts that have historically been so hostile to it, asking for care in tracking how and under what conditions feminism is cited as “universally desirable” in light of this history. I suggest that feminism is partly reframed in this way insofar as it is newly sutured to femininity rather than masculinity, but also to singular rather than multiple or intersectional understandings of women’s oppression. A related claim of this article is that this shift of affective association with feminism is only possible when that singular cause of gender oppression is firmly understood as *sexual oppression*. I will be suggesting that if feminism is understood primarily or even only a fight against sexual oppression by men or heterosexuals against women or homosexuals then the oppositional gendered roles that allow for its tethering to nationalism remain intact yet simultaneously obscured. In conclusion the article calls for an appreciation of feminism as a minority pursuit attentive to multiple power relations and histories.

## Introduction

Those of us who inhabit the contested terrain of European feminist theory and politics are used to feminism being rejected or transformed in ways we are not in control of. We are used to feminism being cast as anachronistic, and its subjects being proposed as anti-male or masculine; and we are used to the paradoxical claiming of feminism for conservative ends, particularly as part of nationalist and militarist projects. This article tracks discursive and political use of gender and sexual equality in nationalist and popular accounts of feminism, focusing on the ways in which such discourses produce a particular linking of time and space in the articulation of “the Modern” in both colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Claims that particular nations or subjects are Modern increasingly rely on propositions of gender or sexual equality as either imminent or having already arrived (Duggan 2003). Gender and sexual rights claims are thus consistently articulated with this “right to be Modern” at their heart, such that their pitch for the space and time of modernity is made with particular affective strength, as Leticia Sabsay (2016) has suggested. This article further explores the increasing popularity of feminism in media and celebrity contexts that have historically been so hostile to it, asking for care in tracking how and under what conditions feminism can be cited as *universally desirable*. A tentative argument is that feminism can only be framed as desirable to the extent that it has moved away from its association with both masculinity and intersectionality, to the extent then that it can be sutured to femininity and singular understandings of women’s oppression. A related claim is that this shift of affective association with feminism is only possible when that singular cause of gender oppression is firmly understood as *sexual oppression*. I will be suggesting that if feminism is

understood primarily a fight against sexual oppression by men or heterosexuals against women or homosexuals then the oppositional gendered roles that allow for its tethering to nationalism remain intact yet simultaneously obscured. Whether freed from gendered and sexual oppression or continuing to be subject to it, women and men remain recognizably women and men: the universal appeal of feminism requires this clarity. While feminism is *not only or indeed primarily* marked by an increased appeal of course – indeed anti-feminism is as virulent as it ever has been (or worse) in many contexts in Europe and globally – I believe that where it *is* cited in those terms it is worth exploring the conditions and implications of that appeal because of what it tells us about current conditions of gendered power and authority.

The article begins with a reminder of some of the different ways in which gender and sexual equality discourses can be put to work in securing a fantasy global landscape of uneven freedoms within a nationalist framework. As a range of feminist, queer and critical race theorists have shown, these discourses frequently rely on gendered, sexual and racial norms, even while appearing to challenge them. It focuses on the temporal and affective features of these geopolitical fantasies and explores some of their most pernicious effects. My argument then shifts to explore several cultural examples that reframe feminism as desirable rather than anachronistic, with particular attention to the role of representations of femininity in launching and securing this appeal.

Foregrounding the ways in which this universality relies on single-issue sexual politics, I query this popularity as a sign of success from a feminist perspective interested in both the exclusionary histories of such politics, and the importance of focusing on overlap and displacement within fields of power relations.

## **The Lure of the Modern**

Participants in feminist theory and politics have acclimated to the cultural and political heralding of postfeminism as signaling both feminism's successes, but also the dwindling necessity of its aggression. Embracing the pleasures of femininity can thus be reframed as active not passive: actively inheriting past gains and actively inhabiting a confidently gendered womanhood (Gill 2003). Angela McRobbie (2009) discusses this cultural movement in terms of its generational myopias and representational limits, while Nancy Fraser (2013) and Sylvia Walby (1997) focus on the problems of a post-feminist ethos that lends itself to feminine surfaces over material and economic depths. While I am suspicious of forms of feminist critique that tell a singular history of loss of politicization and superficiality among the next generation (since its heroine never has to change her political mind), I agree that in many different post-feminist moves, feminism can easily be relegated to the past and her subjects stereotyped as anachronistic in themselves. I am similarly exorcised by the multiple ways in which feminism can be folded into a progress narrative charting a relentless move away from inequality, since it is usually accompanied by claims that such inequality has been (almost) surpassed, and rarely takes account of enduring operations of power or critiques of the basis on which such equality is evaluated. As Anne Phillips (2007) has argued in the context of debates that pit multiculturalism against feminism, mainstreaming of feminist values may be a real achievement, but gains in one place can easily come to stand as evidence of continued backwardness in others, in ways that contribute to the failure to recognize inequalities in places deemed modern or progressive in gendered

terms. In the process, feminism is appealing to the extent that it signals an embrace of modernity in a narrow mode, as Biljana Kašić (2004) has argued in the case of Croatia and Maria do Mar Pereira (2014) has shown in the context of Portugal. Importantly, such narratives and cartographies of progress suggest that feminism is envisaged more as a catalyst than a consistent presence, ideally displaced with the entry to modernity, an unfortunate part of the now-to-be-transcended past. Crucially, for Phillips (2007), simplistic progress narratives of gender and sexual equality also pit members of cultures and nations not understood as developed against one another. For transnational feminist geographer Uma Narayan (1997), this dynamic is not a one-way street, of course. A refusal of the Modern can be claimed as a core part of postcolonial nation-building, such that women continue to be expected to inhabit gender and sexual norms as part of proving national ethnic and religious commitment, as she argues with respect to contemporary India.

The central role that women play as reproducers of nation is one reason why their perceived freedom is so crucial in discursive as well as material terms as a marker of national development and modernity. Postcolonial feminist work on nationalism and gender equality has long highlighted the importance of the promotion of *racialised* gender roles as part of a colonial civilizing mission, across multiple geographical sites (e.g. McClintock, Mufti, and Shoat 1997). Native colonized “others” are always framed as unruly and in need of governance, such that part of entering into Modern colonial or postcolonial recognition involves mimicking white gendered and sexual norms and cultures of respectability. As Merl Storr (1997) has so persuasively argued in respect of sexual governance, colonial regulation requires imposing rigid gender

classifications as a marker of civilisation, and within this schema only certain kinds of (feminine, but also white) womanhood will do. In other words, it is not just any kind of sexual and gendered difference or equality that signals the Modern, but those borne out of fantasies of violent racial superiority.

For Gayatri Spivak (1988), such discourses of colonial and postcolonial modernity are not merely static representations of geo-political power relations. They precipitate and justify a range of interventions through the active grammar of *white men saving brown women from brown men*. For Spivak as for others, the fantasy of white, Western rescue of passive brown female victims of unconscionable brown patriarchs is a key mode through which colonial violence is displaced and refashioned as ethical (see also Young 2003). Racism, we might say, has long been brought to life by discourses of gendered and sexual care. As M. Jacqui Alexander (1994) has noted, this colonial grammar can be adjusted to fit neoliberal versions of these relations very easily, displacing the devastating effects of structural adjustment and the development of tourist economies in poor countries such as Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas, and placing new demands on female subjects to be appropriately reproductive and respectable as part of postcolonial national resistance movements. And we are at this point very familiar with the citation of gender and sexual equality as Modern and desirable as a basis for nationalist, militarist intervention that masks capital and corporate interests in maintaining regional unrest and uneven financial development (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Enloe 1989). As with earlier colonial narratives, so too gender and sexual “rescue” (framed as humanitarian) enacts racialised violence through this displacement. In an important intervention in the feminist work on (post)colonial inheritance, Kalpana Wilson (2013) highlights that recipients of

aid or development may now be encouraged to respond to these narratives through embodying agency rather passivity, chiming with the broader postfeminist concern about “empowerment” as a new form of subordination.

With such discursive closure, women will be positioned – politically and critically – as *de facto* heterosexual in many contexts. In this light, it can be a pertinent intervention in itself to challenge that presumption, both as a way of interrupting the relationship between heteronormativity and nationalist or colonialist projects, but also to make visible queer lives. Yet as a range of commentators have elucidated, gay and lesbian equality is also folded into the question of the Modern. Lisa Duggan’s (2003) foundational work on homonormativity explored ways in which gay and lesbian lives of a particular kind (monogamous, coupled, white) have become central rather than peripheral to a contemporary US national fantasy of tolerance and (post)modernity. And Jasbir K Puar’s (2006) coining of the term “homonationalism” has highlighted the ways in which the “good gay” is frequently pitted against the “bad queer” as part of consolidating the figure of the perverse Islamic or African/Caribbean other so central to US domestic and foreign policy post- 9/11. As queer geographers Jon Binnie and David Bell (2000) have argued, while “homosexual” subjects have only recently been included as potential representatives of the modern nation, their status as ambivalent subjects of modernity actually has a long history. For Duggan and Puar, indeed, the “homo” in “homonormativity” and “homonationalism” is *contingent*, tolerated only insofar as it can be tethered to the broader project of maintaining sexual and gendered binaries in a racialised neoliberal geopolitics. The inclusion of gay and lesbian subjects is predicated on gender difference remaining clearly defined and homosexual identity being

framed through respectability, as Gayle Rubin (1984) insisted many years ago. And as Patricia Hill Collins (1998) sets out, sexual difference and the couple form as the basis of family have a racist colonial history bound up with heterogendered norms. Small wonder then, that trans\* challenges to gender binaries are met with such hostility, despite (or perhaps because of) the fantasy of gender equality as having been achieved. Such challenges figure this equality as taking place *between men and women*, and not beyond their potent symbolics, of course. In turn, as Alyosxa Tudor (2017) has pertinently noted, without a clear intersectional, transnational approach to these heteronormative, colonial narratives, a space is cleared for conservative trans-nationalisms as well.

As a short concluding note to this section, we should also be clear that none of the above mobilisations of gender or sexuality within coloniality or the framing of the Modern through sexual, gendered and raced respectability remains uncontested. It would be easy, perhaps, to look at the continued take-up of gender and sexual equality as part of a global corporate agenda, with its familiar racist history and impact, and think of feminist and queer social movements as having failed. Yet, as Bice Maiguashca (2014) insists, social movements for equality are continuously adapting to challenge as well as conform in their own right. Very recently, we have seen the Women's Marches across Europe and globally to protest President Trump's inauguration in January 2017, and the call for a Global Women's Strike in response to his administration's racism, misogyny and homophobia. Activists for international and intersectional sexual rights such as Sonia Corrêa (2010) consistently struggle against the problems of ongoing co-optation of sexual rights gains, as well as the dangerous exclusions that such approaches can reproduce. And as Cynthia Cockburn's



(2007) remarkable book on women's anti-war activism transnationally affirms, while both gendered and sexual rights remain key to nationalist or militarist agendas, such efforts are also continuously resisted.

### **Feminist But Feminine**

Thus far I have been tracing the importance of an approach that historicises the difficult relationship among gender and sexual equality and their entanglement in histories of colonial and postcolonial nation building and militarism. These are important discussions that highlight how gender and sexual equality work discursively both within and outside feminism, and at different scales, in order to reproduce the hierarchies necessary to justify enacting power and authority over another, or of one geo-political site over another. Yet to return to a point I made at the outset of this article, the question of "gender equality" as the basis of modernity at once relies upon and challenges existing gender roles, and "femininity" in particular remains unattainable for the majority of subjects in this (post)colonial minefield. The colonial construction of gender, race and sexuality mean that black and brown women are always ambivalently placed in relation to femininity. They are by turns hyper feminine in terms of presumed passivity in relationship to a patriarchy they need rescuing from, and hyper masculine in their refusal to meet the terms of white, (post)colonial femininity. The racialised and colonized woman can never actually represent gender, only its modification, excess or failure (Lewis 1996). Importantly too, those (post)colonial heroines of gender equality are also uneasily located at the threshold of ideal femininity. Pushing for rescue of more passive others, arguing for their right to enter the Modern through freedom from gender oppression of the worst order, those

advocates risk taking up a masculinist position in relationship to those they seek to save. This is one reason why it has been important that feminism and gender equality are held apart: since feminism itself is characterized as un-feminine, it constitutes an unstable ground from which to make gender equality claims that leave a gender binary intact. Thus we might say that both the rescuer and the rescued loiter on the edges of a femininity appropriate to heteronormative modernity, and both need to relinquish perverse sexual and gendered respectability in order be allowed *contingent access* to that subject position (Puri 2006). The conventional heroine of an apolitical postfeminism makes this dynamic plain, as she has been characterized by an excess of emancipated, feminine affect, and is as startlingly white as she is finally free of feminist repression (Gill 2003).

It has been my argument thus far that holding feminism and femininity in tension is part of how the gendered and sexual alibis underpinning nationalism and the temporality of the Modern continue to function. But in the last several years, there seems to have been a cultural shift that accompanies these more familiar dynamics. This shift emerges out of a cultural and political arena of representation that is keen to claim feminism as universally desirable, a perfect accessory for the here and now rather than an embarrassing relic to be buried in the closet. Importantly for my argument here, this about turn in representation *relies on* the suturing of oppositional gender roles – and in particular femininity – to feminism, in a conscious inversion of relationship. As I will suggest below, this realignment is dependent on femininity remaining a binary proposition within which “gender equality” remains resolutely heteronormative, a proposition that is also key for its broad appeal. Let us look then at a couple of recent examples of

the ways in which feminism can be claimed as the new, caring position to take up if one is to be properly ethical and political, in contrast to feminism's prior (and dominant) representation as marginal or old-fashioned. The few cases I analyse here are selected as *good examples* of the trend I am identifying, though they should not be thought of as representative of culture overall. My reasons for considering them significant rest on their presentation of feminism as a self-evident, benign good, a feature I want to explore as an important aspect of contemporary depoliticisation of feminist politics.

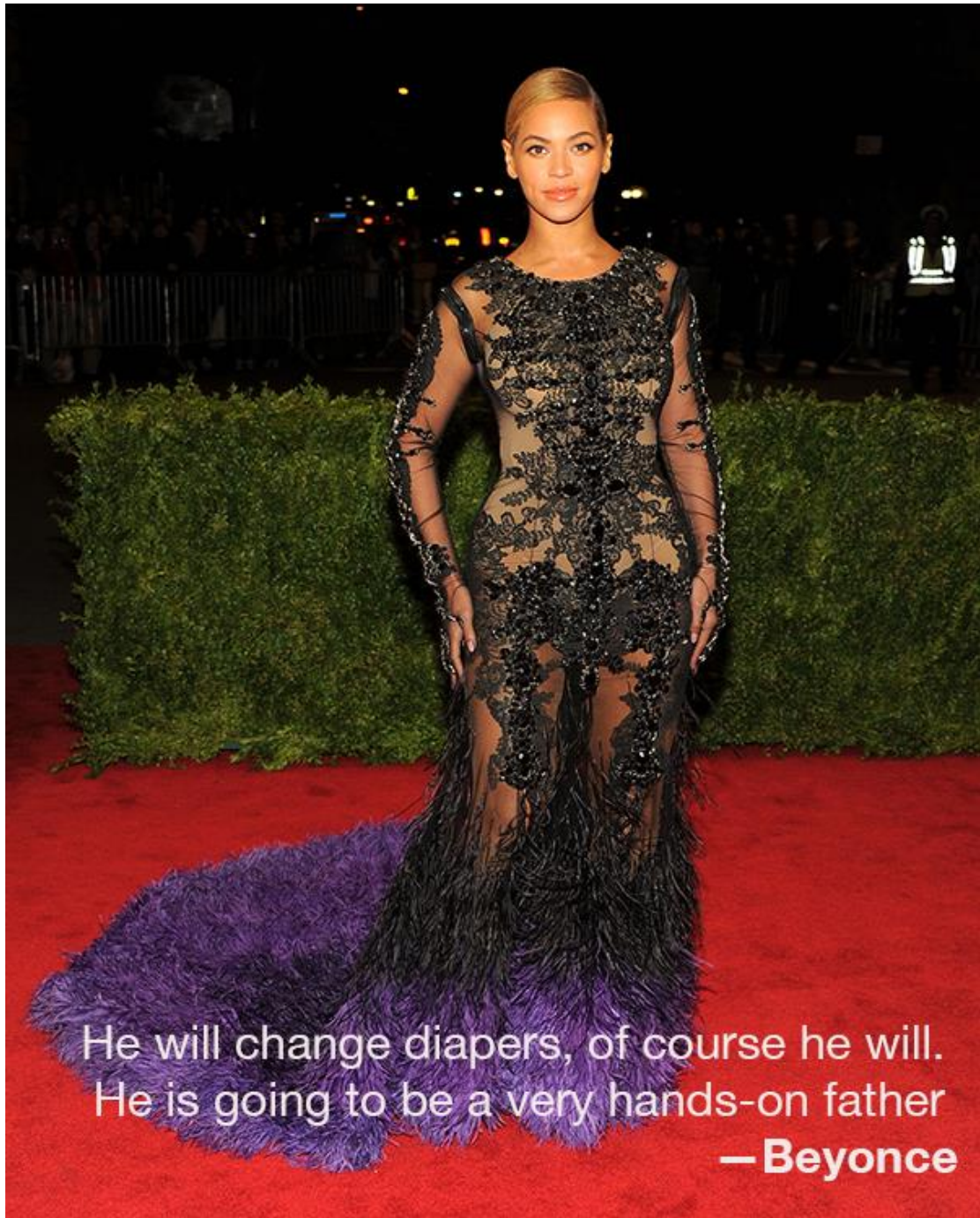
In 2014, *Marie-Claire* led with a special section headed "10 Signs That You're a Feminist," (<http://www.marieclaire.com/politics/news/a9142/10-signs-feminist/> Feb 21, 2014) ironically yet surely integrating feminism into the lifestyle concerns that are the hallmark of women's fashion magazines. In the same year, *Elle UK* launched its "Inaugural Feminist Issue," (<http://www.elleuk.com/now-trending/december-feminism-issue-cover-emma-watson-elle>).with the actor Emma Watson as its covergirl, following her speech at the UN on gender equality. Both fashion magazines sought to give feminism the makeover she deserved, emphasizing the empowered contemporary woman's embrace of femininity and romance in familiar vein. But there was also an important difference too, in the attempt to *suture* femininity and feminism. *Marie-Claire's* title was followed with the subtitle "Hate to break it to you, F-word haters, but you're probably more of a feminist than you think," which retains the original grammar of distance represented by the phrase "I'm not a feminist, but..." only now with a rapprochement after the pause. The acceptability of those "10 Signs..." was underwritten by Beyonce's endorsement underneath; her hype-feminine lacey attire captioned with her determination not to be a domestic

drudge (Fig 1). *Elle's* special issue claimed Emma Watson as the “fresh face” of feminism, referencing once more the assumption that feminism needs the kind of overhaul only a women’s magazine can provide, but branding itself more than capable of that contemporary update. These magazines signal a dual update then, in relationship to our discussion thus far. Femininity is rendered a hallmark of rather than a bar to feminism: indeed we can now see that it has been lurking under the surface waiting to be appreciated as feminism’s glasses are whipped off and its hair shaken out to reveal the shining beauty underneath. So too this femininity is not necessarily white, as the centrality of Beyonce’s hyper-feminine image suggests (Fig 1), as long as it is coded in familiar ways: here through a predictable reference to sharing of childcare, and a celebration of racial difference as another feature of empowered femininity. A recent exception can be found in *Teen Vogue* in which young black American feminists talk about their struggles with feminism and racism (yet even here, representations are of black feminism aligned rather than in tension with femininity – see <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/black-feminists>).

*Elle* combined its feminism issue with a line of “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” t-shirts (<http://www.elleuk.com/now-trending/buy-elle-whistles-fawcwett-feminism-unisex-tshirt>), donating the proceeds to The Fawcett Society feminist campaigning group who coined the wearable phrase in the UK. What was so extraordinary about this campaign was the number of women and men in the public eye that they managed to persuade to wear and be photographed wearing one. Any lingering sign of embarrassment in actor Benjamin Cumberbatch’s or Labour politician Ed Miliband’s strained smiles appear to reference the subsequent scandal about whether the t-shirts had been produced

under exploitative labour conditions in Mauritius or not, rather than any ambivalence about feminist nomenclature. Rosie Boycott broke the story for the *Mail on Sunday* in her piece “Scandal of the 62p-an-hour T-shirts: Shame on the Feminists Who Betrayed the Cause,” in November 2014, which was then refuted by Chris Johnston in his article for *The Guardian* “Feminist T-shirts Made in Ethical Conditions, Says Fawcett Society,” also in November. Disconcertingly, the campaign was marked by general concern about our then Prime Minister David Cameron’s refusal to wear one – and one should perhaps be grateful for small mercies – prompting a somewhat surreal set of broadsheet and tabloid interrogations as to why he should be squeamish about embracing this affirmative identity. My own allegiances lie with Homa Khaleeli, writing for *The Guardian* on 27 October 2014, who insists that “given Cameron’s record so far, one thing is clear: this is not what a feminist looks like.”

It is easy enough to be straightforwardly cynical of such cultural voracity as just the next marketing ploy to sell magazines (like everything else, it turns out that anti-feminism has a shelf life), but this fashionable feminist visibility has also been shared by the broadsheets, in which the question of feminism and who it includes has become consistent copy. While the debates are diverse, including arguments about trans\* inclusion and intersectionality, the majority position is a feminism that departs from seeing women as victims rather than agents of others’ authority, and as rooted in an analysis of women’s oppression as centred



He will change diapers, of course he will.  
He is going to be a very hands-on father  
—Beyonce

in sexual violence or patriarchal control. Heterosexual gender binaries are crucial to sustaining this analysis of women’s oppression, and, as many have noted, this is also an arena of thinking and politics necessarily resistant to its easy reproduction of colonial and anti-migration discourse (Agustin 2007; Andrijasevic 2014). It chimes with the cultural claiming of “femininity as feminism” precisely because of its singular focus on relationships between men

and women; oppositional though perhaps in flux, but most importantly fully *relational*. So at the same time as we are seeing resistance to contemporary nationalisms in the form of the Global Women's Strike, which foregrounded the importance of connecting economic, racist and sexist power relations, a parallel investment in a universally appealing feminism that can be claimed from a familiar hetero-gendered location has considerable purchase.

Let me provide some further context for this argument about the appeal of what I term sexual violence feminism, precisely in terms of its paradoxical confirmation of oppositional gendering. In the last few years, the UK has been beset with sexual violence scandals in which a whole slate of ageing celebrities have been accused, tried and found guilty of sexual abuse starting in the 1970s. These relentless and ongoing revelations have implicated other national institutions such as the BBC, the NHS (particularly mental health services), social services (particularly child protection), the civil service and government. The picture is one of rampant violence and misogyny that was overlooked and minimised at the time it took place, taking decades to emerge as those abused found the courage to speak out (again). Importantly, these transgressions are often presented as uniquely horrific, as though we could not expect anything else of the 1970s, and as though such abuses would not and could not happen today. The irony is glaring, of course, given that this progress narrative both writes out any feminist activism at the time, and erases the fact of rape and sexual violence's grotesque under-reporting and under-prosecution in the present. See [http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/docs/cps\\_vawg\\_report\\_2014.pdf](http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/docs/cps_vawg_report_2014.pdf) for Crown Prosecution Service statistics relating to increased reporting but decreased convictions for rape of women and girls in the UK, which suggest that

recognition of women's experience of sexual violence is getting worse rather than better. This article is, indeed, being completed at the moment in which accusations of sexual harassment and rape against Harvey Weinstein and other celebrities and politicians in the US and globally have been met with women's insistence that sexual violence marks their everyday experience as women in the "Me Too" campaigns (see: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment>). Feminist groups that focus on sexual violence (such as UK Feminista) are thus caught in the curious temporal plays underpinning fantasies of gender and sexual equality as almost if not quite yet achieved. Their cultural popularity reflects an investment in precisely the temporal distinction they want to challenge: their activism is a sign of living in times where women will no longer put up with sexual violence, as well as a sign of its continued cultural and social prevalence. Thus "sexual violence feminism" can ironically enough be framed as the *one kind of feminism* that everyone can agree on: one that identifies sexual and gender-based violence as the basis of gender oppression, while simultaneously positioning widespread sexual violence as part of the actual or (soon to be) past. As suggested, this is an oddly reassuring feminism that can confirm (as much as it challenges the consequences of) sexual difference, operating as the oppressive alternate side of the celebration of those differences in declarations of feminism as newly feminine. It is a performative feminism too, in that to embrace it is to make sexual violence passé in the moment of the claiming of its contemporary importance. Up until Trump, perhaps, men (no matter how they actually acted) would not want to appear to embrace the negatives of sexual difference represented by sexual violence –



precisely in order to inhabit the Modern. And insofar as the positive version of this binary and fatalistic story also reifies gender difference through suturing femininity and feminism, there do not even need to be outward changes in gender representation to signal such a political and affective shift. Post-Trump, it will no doubt be even easier to claim feminism; on the basis that one is after all not *that much* of a violent, pussy-grabbing misogynist.

To return to the popularity of “looking like a feminist,” then, to don the t-shirt might thus be said to be a way of marking oneself out as “not one of those old misogynists,” and to signal a break with *anti-feminism* (which would now be cast as both old-fashioned and pro-sexual violence; as though Trump were part of the past and not the terrifying present). But to take up this position is also to take up a pro-censorship and anti-prostitution position that has long characterised such forms of feminism. Again, this is uncontroversial for celebrities and politicians whose careers can be decimated with the smallest whiff of sexual scandal. But in the process, both sexual violence feminism itself and those who celebrate its new openness, rewrite history in yet another way, by simplifying the complex debates over the nature of sexual violence, the significance of porn, or the character of sex work, that have been central to feminism since its inception (Duggan 2006). So too the intersectional critiques of this strand of feminism – as perpetuating racial and classed stereotypes in their preference for marches in poor neighborhoods, or as ignoring the complex modes of oppression and freedom that different women and men face – are positioned as diluting a clear agenda in ways that tell a simple story of prior solidarity upset by successive desires for representation. Julie Burchill’s piece for *The Spectator* takes this familiar line, casting “intersectionality” as erasing

socialist feminism's proper politics

(<http://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/02/dont-you-dare-tell-me-to-check-my-privilege/>). Nancy Fraser's *Fortunes of Feminism* (2013) enacts a similar temporality, casting a politics of diversity as the main catalyst for fragmentation of an otherwise, and previously, united and effective feminist movement. That this movement was always multiple, and always thronging with people who did not see themselves recognized in singular accounts of feminist aims, is conveniently forgotten in such accounts. The subject of feminism, when oppression is understood as rooted in experience of sexual violence, is most often imagined as straightforwardly female too. Anti-porn and anti-sexual violence feminisms thus privilege "women born as women" over the experiences of a range of subjects targeted by masculine violence or objectification. The "Me Too" campaigns referenced earlier repeats this presumption, with challenges to a broader coalition of voices of those facing harassment in the face of masculinist dominance – cis-women, trans\* men and women, gender non-conforming subjects, effeminate men and queers of a variety of stripes, all men, women trans\* and queer subjects of color – in preference to a privileging of sexual and gender violence as the preserve of women who have always lived as such. The opportunities for coalition and solidarity in the face of sexual and gendered violence are thus displaced in favour of gender-opposed understandings of personal and political subjection. Understanding sexual and gendered violence as primarily experienced through a binary between men and women fits neatly – as it has done for over one hundred and fifty years – with the progress narratives of modernity and democracy that mark other contexts and cultures as uniquely patriarchal through their failures to place sexual violence in their own pasts,

even when – or most especially when – this failure might be said to mark all states and cultures. The opportunities for an integrated, intersectional account of how violence works to position a broad range of subjects as outside heteronormative authority are briefly raised, only to be dismissed as part of a lamentable fragmentation that dilutes feminist politics and experience.

The reliance on gendered difference at the moment of reimagining feminism as universal does other work too. It naturalizes economic relations between women and men at precisely the point of heightened European austerity. Across Europe, the cuts in public funding are felt more keenly by women, who are both poorer earners in public sector work and who are already subject to the pay gap (Brah, Szeman and Gedalof 2015). Women are the ones called on to pick up the slack when social resources are withdrawn, and this is often referred to as “re-traditionalisation”: the turning back to *older* gender relations within kinship and community ties, as part of how economic downturns are managed, and as part of how women continue to be constituted as a reserve army of labour. The repeated – not so much precarious, but *fundamentally temporary* – nature of women’s access to the labour market has always required naturalization in order not to appear as it is: a privileging of a white, male breadwinner model that represents racialised, patriarchal and state interests. A discourse of re-traditionalisation risks participating in the same game, then, by reading current manipulation of gender norms as a return, a failure of the present to move beyond its unequal past, rather than as an enduring condition of gendered discourse. The desire to include women as full and equal participants in the public sphere (or to present them as already such participants) is *necessarily contradicted* by the creation of conditions that

prevent them from being able to participate. It is these conditions – lower pay, lack of care provision, presumption of women as carers – as well as a continued failure to see these as naturalized aspects of cultural and economic heteronormativity – that underwrite the expectation that women will inevitably pick up the slack. This is, to my mind then, less a paradox or temporal lag, than the *precise mode* through which enduring inequality is naturalized and displaced.

One reason why I think it is so important to track the appeal of a “universal feminism” that sutures feminism and femininity in some instance of contemporary representation, then, is that the citation of gender inequality’s temporality allows for a reinstantiation of gender difference, all the while appearing to challenge the limits such binarism represents. In other words, I want to propose that the linking of feminism and femininity domesticates the former, reifies heteronormative oppositions between men and women, and positions sexual violence as well as unequal domestic labour in (our Western) past (even when it remains very clearly present). Importantly, it is this made-over feminist subject who continues to do the rescue work in relation to those female subjects imagined as hyper-terrorised: the cut; the veiled; the temporally stymied. Only this time our feminist heroine does not have to give up her femininity *or* her victimhood; she can be both *victim and agent*. While appealing in a range of ways, this complicated reinstantiation of gender binaries in (post)colonial discourse is one powerful mode through which gender inequality is currently perpetuated.

### **Concluding Dilemmas**

The shame of wearing the “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” t-shirt did not derive from the mismatch between claiming feminism and doing no work towards the alleviation of gender inequality. It arose from being implicated in the global economic inequality that produced the t-shirts themselves, as though there were no relationship between these issues. On the one hand, we would want to encourage a take-up of feminism in the world, expecting surely that it will not necessarily mirror one’s own concerns. On the other hand, when “feminism” functions specifically as a trope through which ongoing intersectional gender inequality is managed or even ensured rather than alleviated, we face particular political and ethical dilemmas. If “feminism” is a reassuring part of national heteronormative pride in an era of cynical wars, displacement and anti-immigration feeling and legislation, what are the possible next steps for feminists concerned to reside in a progressive Europe?

I want to propose two temporary responses: uncoupling feminism and gender/sexual politics; and insisting on feminism as a minority pursuit. In the first case, I have been experimenting for some time now with ways of disarticulating feminism from her presumed feminist subject. In “Affective Solidarity” (Hemmings 2012) I was interested in thinking about disappointment and unease with gender roles as a basis for solidarity, irrespective of what happens next in terms of politicization, repression or even hostility to feminism. I took this from the ways in which I share an affective critique of the limits of gender roles with my mum, even though she would never call herself a feminist. I was trying to think through a feminism that allows for both me and my mum, that would refuse to start from the assumption that I hold the upper hand, or assume that my identification as a feminist means I am more likely to challenge

gendered or sexual norms than she is. In fact, now I reflect on these questions anew, my feminist identity has often meant I have hidden continued gender inequality in my own practices, since I am more ashamed of them than a non-feminist might be. The concept of “affective solidarity” was intended to open up a feminism that contains feminist subjects and non-feminist subjects, starting from the appreciation of different locations within knowledge and politics and the recognition of the importance of dissonance whether or not it leads to a particular identity.

Importantly, I do not think this vision is an entirely open one. It cannot contain anti-feminism, for example, even as it can contain subjects other than feminists. In this reflection I have been strongly influenced by my reading of Emma Goldman, whose role in a rethinking of the temporalities of feminism I have been grappling with over the last decade. Goldman was an anarchist activist (1869-1940) who centered questions of sexual oppression in her analysis of authority, and who linked that oppression to nationalist, militarist and capitalist interests (Goldman 1908). For Goldman, the sexual freedom necessary for revolution could not be articulated through the narrowness of feminist aims for “equality” with the most privileged (1910). Indeed, Goldman strongly dis-identified from feminism, and I resist the feminist critical desire to reclaim her as a feminist despite her outspoken refusal to be so characterized. For me, it is more important for a contemporary feminism that Goldman did not – ever – *exit the scene* of gender and sexual politics: quite the opposite, she fought tooth and nail throughout her life to improve conditions for women. For Goldman, though, women and men needed first to focus on their internal demons in order to effect real and lasting change, taking responsibility for and struggling with their own

conservative as well as radical desires in relation to others. In other words, while we might say that contemporary invocation of feminism is a mode through which inequality is secured; for Goldman, distance from feminism was a way to wrestle with deep gendered and sexual demons. Goldman's prioritization of sexual freedom as a key to revolution challenged the complementarity of gender relations that privileges male authority while keeping it hidden. For Goldman, only the resignification of female capacity – as active, desiring and vital – would challenge a public/private divide that for her under-wrote all other social inequalities. We have much to learn from Goldman, I think, about the importance of going beyond gender ascriptions even as we resist the characterization of women as inferior to men. Importantly, too, for Goldman, this project of gender transformation was the only way to challenge nationalism and racism, both of which she understood as emerging from and reproducing narrow kinship investments (between 1927 and 1930).

Consideration of both Goldman and my mum both point me towards the significance of thinking about feminism as a minority pursuit. Their shared grammar of dis-identification is the norm rather than the exception. One might say, indeed, that one thing that could be said to unite women *across generations* is their consistent rejection of and dis-identification from feminism. As a political movement and set of theories that (ambivalently and imperfectly) challenge the roots of femininity and gender relations as heterosexist, classist and racist, perhaps we should not expect feminism to be universally embraced. To do so may precisely be to undermine its critical capacity, may precisely blunt the ability to say: "you are wearing a t-shirt you have no right to, since you have evidenced no interest in analysing or transforming the horrors of contemporary

gender.” One might add (and here we do of course have to wonder who is speaking) “Your continued wearing of this t-shirt in the face of this disinterest demonstrates your interest in maintaining the gender, sexual and racial inequalities you want to claim are already in the past.” Goldman was not afraid of judgment, and neither should we be, particularly not now when the relationship between feminism and racism/nationalism is so complicated and intense. So my second tactic might be to reclaim being a feminist as the very definition of a minority pursuit, one involving judgments of and struggles over the terms femininity and feminism, as well as their relationship to one another from an intersectional and historically attuned perspective.

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