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Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism?

Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation

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As feminist media studies and cultural studies scholars, we have been preoccupied for many years with the various ways in which feminist concepts, expressions, practices, and sensibilities - and backlashes against them - have circulated and manifested in popular and media culture. Rosalind Gill has written extensively about *postfeminism;* Catherine Rottenberg has coined the term *neoliberal feminism*; and Sarah Banet-Weiser has just finished a book on *popular feminism.* In our theorisations, we have benefited greatly both from reading each other's work and from intellectual conversations with other feminist scholars and have found that there are productive and compelling differences among and between our approaches as well as deep similarities. We decided to have a conversation about our varied approaches, as both a feminist project in itself and a way to push our thinking about contemporary gender politics further. This conversation has yielded, among other things, a better understanding of the ways in which theories about gender speak to each other, borrow from each other, and can contribute to a collaborative mode of thinking about contemporary feminism.

In our conversations it became clear that there are central themes that thread through all of our perspectives, and thus we use this space to think through these themes. Our first theme

is *positionings*. In this section, we discuss how each of us approaches contemporary manifestations of feminism through slightly different optics. Ros, for example, theorises postfeminism as a kind of *sensibility*, the way in which postfeminism is not only created, expressed and circulated, but also received and reproduced. Catherine focuses on a key analytic within neoliberalism, namely, neoliberalism's entanglement with feminism, which emphasises professional and economic success but not at the expense of family. Sarah argues that the postfeminist sensibility that Ros theorises has authorised a *popularity* of feminism, one that is tied to media visibility, circulation, and affective embrace.

Our second theme is *media and capitalism.* Here, we think through the fact that post, neoliberal, and popular feminism all depend on and validate media platforms and organisations as well neoliberal capitalism. These iterations of contemporary feminism do not critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms that are co-constituitive with capitalism), but rather contribute to its normalisation and conceit of inevitability.

Finally, our third theme attempts to push back at this kind of normalisation in terms of *alternatives/ambivalences.* Despite the fact that all of us have written critically about contemporary feminisms, our critique also represents our investment in alternatives that might challenge current feminist iterations. In this section, we discuss the ambivalences we feel are potentially generative in post, neoliberal and popular feminisms, and think through what might be effective counter-productions within them. We thus offer some ruminations about how these ambivalences might be mobilized to effect a renewed vision of economic, racial and gender justice.

Positionings

Rosalind Gill: The term postfeminism came to prominence in the 1990s in the English-speaking world as a way of making sense of paradoxes and contradictions in the representation of women. In the media culture of the time, celebrations of 'girl power' and female success sat alongside the intense hostile scrutiny of women in the public eye; pronouncements about gender equality were juxtaposed with the growing misogyny of 'lad culture'; and assertions about the redundancy of feminism were paired with an intensified interest in sexual difference, and with the repeated assertion that any remaining inequalities were not the result of sexism but of natural differences and/or as women's own choices. The apparent certainty of earlier periods had fragmented, giving way to a moment in which there seemed to be no singular template of normative femininity, and a strong sense of female autonomy, agency and choice pervaded media discourses. Everywhere feminism seemed – in Angela McRobbie's (2009) famous formulation – to be 'taken into account' yet 'repudiated'. The term 'postfeminist' – or sometimes post-feminist (with a much-contested hyphen) – developed as a way of speaking to the distinctiveness of circulating discourses and representations, and became a key part of the feminist lexicon.

Against this context, I coined the notion of a 'postfeminist *sensibility'* to intervene in debates in three key ways. First, the notion of sensibility was designed to respond to the vastly different ways in which the term postfeminism was being used. As I argued (Gill, 2007), some people used the term to signal a temporal or historical shift – a time *after* second-wave feminism; others used it to delimit a new *kind* of feminism – sometimes a feminism influenced by post-structuralist or post-colonial thinking, or, alternatively, something akin to a new (third) 'wave' of feminism; while others still used the term to refer solely to a *backlash* against feminism. None of

these was entirely convincing to me or only seemed to speak to part of the picture, and, what's more, the terms often seemed to be used interchangeably with people slipping between different meanings. The notion of sensibility was developed firstly, then, to contribute to conceptual clarity about the term.

Secondly, the idea of sensibility was designed to emphasise that 'postfeminism' should be considered as a *critical object* – not, as was sometimes the case, taken to be an analytical perspective. That is, I sought to highlight that I am a *feminist* analyst of postfeminist culture, and *not* a postfeminist analyst or theorist. This foregrounded the idea of a *critical approach to postfeminism* – a sensibility that I argued had as much to do with neoliberalism as with feminism.

Thirdly, the notion of a sensibility was designed to be used *empirically* as a way of analysing popular culture. It called attention to postfeminism as a circulating set of ideas, images, and meanings. Alternative formulations might have dubbed it an 'ideology' or a 'discourse' or even a 'regime', but the term 'sensibility' seemed more open, and also called attention to features that are sometimes explored through notions of affect, public mood, atmosphere or 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1961), and that might be missed with an approach that centred only language. In my original work discussing postfeminism in media culture I considered several repetitive features of the sensibility, including the emphasis upon choice and autonomy, the focus on women's bodies as their source of value, and the centrality of ideas of 'makeover', including the requirement to 'upgrade' one's psychic life to be positive, confident and glowing.

Since that initial formulation over ten years ago I've been thinking a lot more about the notion and developing it in several key ways, often in collaboration with students, friends and colleagues. There's also been an extraordinary uptake of the term more generally, and I feel that my work is very much part of an ongoing and collective conversation – including with you both. One of the most important sets of debates is about postfeminism's relationship to race, class, sexuality, disability and age. Of course much critical work on postfeminism has always attempted to think intersectionally. Key writers on postfeminism such as Angela McRobbie, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker have all been attentive to difference, in particular writing critically about race and class, with some arguing that the female subject centred by postfeminism is 'white and middle class by default' (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 3). In my own earlier work in *Elements* I reflected upon the need to think about postfeminism as 'racialized and heterosexualized' (Gill, 2007), later arguing for the need to think sexism *with* racism, ageism, classism, homophobia, (dis)ablism and also to think transnationally (Imre et al, 2009). As I noted, 'it is not simply a matter of *integrating* sexism with other axes of power and difference, but also facing up to the complex dynamics *and complicities* in play in the current moment.' (Gill, 2011:69).

So I don't think it's a matter that earlier work ignored differences other than gender, but more that recent interrogations have pushed beyond the terms of inclusion versus exclusion. Jess Butler's (2013) paper 'For white women only?' was germinal in this, as was Simidele Dosekun's (2015) questioning of the assumption that postfeminism was a distinctively western sensibility. More recently I've been working with Roisin Ryan-Flood (Flood and Gill, 2017) on whether or not the subject interpellated by postfeminist discourse can be 'presumed heterosexual' – building

on important work by Kate McNicholas Smith (McNicholas Smith and Tyler, 2017) and Hannah McCann (2015) – and with Ngaire Donaghue on thinking about age and generation. Overall, what all this work seems to be highlighting is the spreading out of postfeminism – the diffusion of its address across different groups and contexts; its attempts to speak to women of different ages, classes, sexual orientations, and so on.

The other strand of development has been an increasing focus on the psychic and affective life of postfeminism, which I have been developing with Christina Scharff, Shani Orgad and Akane Kanai. In different ways all of us have been trying to grasp the way in which the sensibility operates on emotions, feelings and subjectivity. Christina and I have worked – in homage to Judith Butler – on the 'psychic life' of neoliberalism (Scharff, 2016) and posfeminism (Gill, 2017). Shani and I are looking at how there is a turn to the qualities and dispositions – e.g. confidence, resilence, positive mental attitude – needed to survive and thrive in the current moment (Gill and Orgad, 2015; 2017; 2018). And with Akane I have been developing the idea of postfeminist or neoliberal 'feeling rules' – building out of Akane's reading (Kanai, 2017a; 2017b) of Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work. Taken together, this work is increasingly interested in what we see as a psychological turn in neoliberalism and postfeminism (Gill and Kanai, 2018a; 2018b). This perhaps resonates especially strongly for me because of my background in psychology and sociology, and my interest in the psychosocial.

Catherine Rottenberg: My work has been profoundly influenced by Ros's articulation of postfeminism as a critical object. It was precisely against the background of Ros's and Angela

McRobbie's conceptualisation of postfeminism that I developed the notion of neoliberal feminism.

I would like to say a few words about the genesis of my project in order to underscore the particular problematic that I was trying to understand and theorise. The project began when I was on sabbatical in the US in 2012-2013 – precisely the year that Anne-Marie Slaughter's 'Why Women Still Can't Have it All' was published in the *Atlantic*. That piece created a real stir, generating heated debate, and catapulted Slaughter, who was a former Princeton dean and advisor to Hillary Clinton when she was secretary of state, into the national spotlight. Slaughter's article went on to become the most widely read essay in the history of the *Atlantic*. This was also the year in which the COO of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg's feminist manifesto *Lean In* was published and instantly became a *New York Times* bestseller. All of a sudden, or so it seemed, powerful and high-profile women were publicly identifying as feminist, something that we hadn't seen in the past. So I began to read these two manifestos very carefully.

I am trained as a literary critic, so for me reading Slaughter and later Sandberg was an exercise in textual analysis. I was struck by a number of rhetorical aspects – but perhaps most of all by all the circulation of a new feminist vocabulary, where happiness, balance, and 'lean in' were replacing key terms traditionally inseperable from public feminist discussions and debates, namely, autonomy, rights, liberation, and social justice.

I became preoccupied with questions like: given that postfeminist sensibility was doing such a good job in disavowing or repudiating the need for feminism, how might we explain the

resuscitation of this eviscerated feminist discourse on the cultural landscape? In other words, what kind of cultural work was this perplexing variant of feminism carrying out? I began to call this form of feminism neoliberal feminism, since, while is very clearly avows gender inequality – thus, I believe, differentiating it from a postfeminist sensibility – it simultaneously disavows the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping our lives. This feminism also helps to spawn a new *feminist* subject, one who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care**.**

In the US, this new feminist's well-being and self-care seemed to be predicated on crafting a felicitous work-family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. The notion of a happy work-family balance is central to this discourse, and I began to notice that 'balance' was being bandied about all over the mainstream and popular press as a *feminist* ideal.

I tried to give an account for why we might be witnessing the rise of a new variant of feminism. I suggested that neoliberalism may actually 'need' feminism to resolve – at least temporarily – one of its internal tensions in relation to gender (Rottenberg, 2014a; 2014b; 2017; 2018). Following Wendy Brown (2015; 2016), I understand neoliberalism not just as a set of economic policies but as a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as human capital and thus capital enhancing agents. Thus, as an economic order, neoliberalism relies on reproduction and care work in order to reproduce and maintain so-called human capital. However, as a political rationality – and in contrast to liberalism – neoliberalism has no lexicon that can recognise let alone value reproduction and care work. Everything is reduced to a market metrics, even our political imagination. The disappearance of a political lexicon is not only due to human subjects being

increasingly converted into generic human capital, where gender is disavowed, but also because the division of the public-private spheres – informing liberal thought and traditional notions of the sexual division of labor – is being eroded through the conversion of everything into capital and the infiltration of a market rationality into all spheres of life, including the most private ones.

As I argue in *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, what this means is that different registers – political, economic, social, and affective – collapse under the hegemony of neoliberalism, and all forms of valuation transpire through a market metrics. Neoliberal *feminism* thus operates as a kind of pushback to the total conversion of educated and upwardly mobile women into generic human capital. By maintaining reproduction as part of middle-class or so-called aspirational women's normative trajectory and positing *balance* as its normative frame and ultimate ideal, neoliberal *feminism* helps to both maintain a discourse of reproduction and care-work while ensuring that all responsibility for these forms of labor – but not necessarily all of the labor itself – falls squarely on the shoulder of so-called aspirational women. In this way it solves its own constitutive tension – the quandary of reproduction and care-work – at least temporarily. Indeed, neoliberal *feminism* produces and maintains a distinctive and affective lexiconic register of reproductive and care-work within neoliberalism, even as neoliberal rationality collapses the boundaries and divides constitutive of liberal thought, such as the private-public divide.

This kind of hyper-individualising neoliberal feminism, which construes women not only as entrepreneurial subjects but also as individual enterprises, is clearly more easily mainstreamed and popularised since it has been defanged of most if not all of its oppositional force. And while it might acknowledge that the gendered wage gap and sexual harassment are signs of continued

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gender inequality, the solutions it posits elide the structural or economic undergirding of these phenomena. This is where I believe my work and Sarah's work really complement one another. And where postfeminism absolutely still resonates but with a difference.

Sarah's work on popular feminism has compelled me to think about the relationship between neoliberal feminismand the rise of popular feminism. I would tentatively argue that neoliberal feminism, with its constitutive notion of a happy work-family balance, has helped to render feminism palatable and legitimate, which has, in turn, facilitated feminism's widespread diffusion, embrace and circulation within the Anglo-American mainstream cultural landscape. And in many crucial ways it was the postfeminist sensibility that Ros formulates that helped created the conditions for the rise of neoliberal feminism.

Sarah Banet-Weiser: Like Ros and Catherine, I have been thinking a lot about the ways in which a postfeminist sensibility has been both validated and challenged in the past 10 years. When I wrote about postfeminism and girl culture a decade ago, I, like Ros, was struck by the contradictions within and between a growing market for girls that centred 'girl power' as its key selling point and a cultural, social and economic context that clearly saw the 'power' in girl power as almost exclusively about consumer power – not a challenge of gendered power relations and rationalities.

I was also struck by the normative repudiation of feminism and feminist politics and values in everyday life. Year after year, I would teach undergraduates who insisted – vehemently – that they were *not* feminists – and nor did they *need* to be, as political and economic obstacles to

gender equality had apparently been overcome. The stark contradictions between this *feeling* of gender equality and the reality seemed easily explained away – through individual desires and aspirations rather than concrete and material contexts.

But at around the same time that Catherine was thinking through the visibility of Slaughter's 'Why Women Still Can't Have it All', I was also noticing a shift in visibility of more overt feminist statements – that announced themselves *as* feminist – in popular culture. Because my work often focuses on material conditions and markets, I began to attend to the ways these popular feminist statements connected to an increasingly visible market and economy. So, when I write about popular feminism, I am, in part, defining and describing a set of *social conditions* that I am calling popular feminism; for me, these conditions form the logic of a popular feminist sensibility. Some of my guiding questions in thinking about popular feminism involve those who have shifted from the earlier rejection of feminism as part of their identities: who can we think of as a popular feminist? What are the goals of popular feminism?

In the contemporary moment, I see popular feminism as existing along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured (see Gill, 2011; 2016; Rottenberg, 2014b; McRobbie, 2009). In general, for me popular feminism refers to practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public, from organising marches to hashtag activism to commodities. Popular feminism is also, like both Ros and Catherine point out, a 'happy' feminism, one that is about uplift, that is decidedly *not* what Sara Ahmed (2010) has called a 'feminist killjoy'. As I argue in my book,

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seeing and hearing a safely affirmative feminism in spectacularly visible ways often eclipses a

feminist critique of structure as well as obscures the labor involved in producing oneself

according to the parameters of popular feminism; 'the visibility of popular feminism, where

examples appear on television, in film, on social media, and on bodies, is important but it often

stops there, as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal

structures' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 4).

While postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and popular feminism are all sensibilities that exist

simultaneously, they are also engaged in a cultural conversation with each other that builds and

expands; a central tenet of postfeminist sensibility, as Ros has discussed, is a focus on personal

(and consumer/economic) choice. Personal choice is, of course, a key logic of neoliberalism; as

Catherine points out, neoliberal feminism depends not only on gendered entrepreneurialism but

also individual enterprise. Popular feminism clearly connects to these neoliberal principles of

individualism and entrepreneurialism, and in this sense neoliberal feminism helped construct the

context for popular feminism to flourish in popular culture and media.

I also contend though, that popular feminism does, in fact, owe a debt to liberal feminism's

critique of gendered exclusions in the public and corporate spheres. As I argue in my book, this

corporate-friendly popular feminism emanates from an increasing visibility of a gendered

disparity in dominant economic spheres – a lack of female CEOs and film directors, a lack of

women in technology and media fields, an increased awareness of sexual harassment within

corporate industries such as media and technology. The popular feminisms I analyse are, like

liberal feminism, in many ways a call to bring more women to the table, simply because they are

women. Popular feminism, that is, has a history in what Joan Scott has called an 'add women and stir' kind of liberal feminism, where the presence of women is sufficient enough to call feminism into being (Scott, 1991). The inclusion of women becomes the solution for all gender problems, not just those of exclusion or absence. It is, of course, important to have bodies at the table, but their mere presence doesn't necessarily challenge the structure that supports, and builds, the table in the first place; as Scott points out, merely including women does not address 'the framework of (historically contingent) dominant patterns of sexuality and the ideology that supports them' (Scott, 1991: 25). In this way, I think that popular feminism and its exhortations to simply have *more* women in various cultural, political and economic realms can be read as similar to continuing liberal efforts to include people of color within a widened field of whiteness, one that continues to shape representation, work, and politics. This inclusion often comes without interrogating the racism that forms the boundaries and structures of whiteness from the ground up (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

The focus on inclusion by popular and neoliberal feminism is authorised by a specific political economic context. The market in feminism is not simply about commodification of slogans, political messages, and feminist products; it is also about validating an economic subject and an economic context, one in which the inclusion of women signals feminism – though this inclusion, this version of feminism, isn't necessarily committed to interrogating sexist and racist structural ground. In other words, as Catherine argues in her book, popular feminism rarely critiques neoliberalism and its values; on the contrary, these values – economic success, new market growth, self-entrepreneurship – are all part and parcel of popular feminism. Thus, we can't analyse popular feminism in isolation; rather, we need to understand it as co-constituitive

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of capitalist practices, values, and divisions of labor. And this leads us to our second theme that connects post, neoliberal, and popular feminism: neoliberal capitalism.

Media/Capitalism

Sarah: I would say that the focus on *inclusion* by popular feminism makes it specifically corporate friendly; it has benefited from decades of neoliberal commodity activism, where companies have taken up women's issues, especially those that have to do with individual consumption habits, as a key selling point for products (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012).

And, as we know, the architecture of many of these popular media platforms is capitalist and corporate. As we have seen historically, specific messages of feminism are often incorporated into advertising and marketing, and contemporary popular feminism is no different. As both Ros and Catherine have pointed out, the contemporary landscape offers us constant emotional advertising campaigns, where major global companies (Verizon, CoverGirl, Dove, and so on), urge us to pay closer attention to girls and women and the obstacles they face in the world (and not surprisingly, these companies also imply that overcoming these obstacles depends on individual girls and women's energies and ambitions, rather than examining the ways capitalism depends on gendered divisions of labor). The new 'products' in neoliberal capitalism, as Catherine has argued so powerfully, are heralded by successful female entrepreneurs who plead with girls and women to overcome 'imposter syndrome' and to 'lean in'. Girl empowerment organisations, both in the US and in global development, insist that focusing on gender equality

is 'smarter economics', and again, that girls and women need to 'lean in' to be economically successful. Teaching girls and women to code in computing, as a way to address the marginalisation of women in technology industries, became a hot new industry itself.

The brand of feminism has been stamped on clothing, jewelry, and other personal accutrements. Etsy and others offer feminist tank tops, buttons, and entire wardrobes. We can buy 'Empowered' crop tops at H&M, or for those feminists who have financial means, we can wear the $710.00 t-shirt designed by Christian Dior that proclaims 'We Should All Be Feminists'. We can drink our coffee out of mugs that say 'Smash the Patriarchy' or 'Women Power' (and indeed I **do** drink my coffee out of these mugs!). Pop-up shops in New York, Los Angeles, and London have all kinds of feminist merchandise for us to buy and then proudly display our feminism.

But perhaps it is social and digital media that has been the most visible platform for popular feminism. As I write about in *Empowered,* we have seen an explosion of feminist hashtag activism, from #bringbackourgirls to #solidarityisforwhitewomen to #yesallwomen, to #NotOkay, and of course, to #metoo. The blogosphere has become an important site for feminists to express passionate defenses and celebrations of feminism and exhortations toward feminist and anti-racist activism. But in order to emerge so forcefully, popular feminism needs a neoliberal capitalist context, including digital media and its affordances and its expanded markets and circulation capabilities. Digital media has afforded spaces and places for popular feminists to create media, voice their opinions, launch a business. So for me, contemporary feminism is popular in part because of the media forms on which it circulates; feminist messages of gender inequality, body-positivity, equal pay for equal work, the normalisation of sexual

harassment, self-confidence – these circulate and achieve visibility on multiple media platforms and industries.

I want to be clear here; the popular feminism I discuss in my book focuses on media expressions and their circulation – I am not making an argument about the political intentions that energise a variety of feminist practices; it is about how these political intentions are marshalled by institutions and structures, and what they make available and what they foreclose in terms of politics.

For me, it is important to analyse the *popular* in popular feminism to see how it is distinct from other feminist practices and expressions, as well as to understand its connection with contemporary capitalism. What are its boundaries, its borders? Is it defined by its politics, its visibility, where it emanates from? The popular feminism I analyse generally materialises as a kind of *media* that is widely visible and accessible: 'It appears on broadcast media, in television and advertising. It appears in popular music. In the contemporary context, it appears perhaps most urgently in social media, with digital sites such as Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter providing platforms for its circulation' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 9). As I argue in *Empowered,* popular feminism circulates in an economy of visibility. Yet, visibility is never simple. Media scholars, feminists, critical race scholars, LGBTQ scholars, and others have worked over many decades in the name of visibility; in a media context in which if you are visible, you *matter,* visibility matters indeed (e.g., Grewal, 2005; Hegde, 2011; Gross, 2012; Gray, 2013).

Part of this visibility means being accessible to a large, popular audience. And, this popularity and accessibility are measured in and through its ability to increase that visibility; popular feminism engages in a feedback loop, where it is more popular when it is more visible, which then authorises it to create ever-increasing visibility. Visibility is not a static thing, it has to be in a constant state of growth. But, as we also know, in a media context in which most circuits of visibility are driven by profit, competition, and consumers, simply *becoming* visible does not guarantee that identity categories will somehow be transformed, or will deeply challenge hegemonic power relations. In large part, this is because becoming visible in this digital and 'datafied' context is intricately connected to the contemporary political economy and the structural logics of capitalist accumulation. Popular feminism thus relies in some ways on 'platform capitalism', implying the emptying or flattening out of the *content* of meaning, emphasizing instead the endless traffic and circulation of this content (Hearn, 2017). Media and entertainment platforms are conditioning the content of feminism (among other things), so that business models end up conditioning the types of feminist expressions that we see. The contemporary obsession with metrics, the numbers, likes and followers also frames popular feminism; given the predominance of digital media platforms that are predicated on the accumulation of numbers, where their business depends on these numbers; then to make oneself visible or to express oneself is also dependent on an accumulation of numbers.

This feminist economy of visibility also facilitated postfeminism and neoliberal feminism; in the contemporary moment, however, the visibility of popular feminism becomes an end in itself (Gray, 2013). In other words, most popular feminisms are typically those that become visible precisely because they do not challenge deep structures of inequities (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Ros: I absolutely recognise the 'neoliberal feminism' and the 'popular feminism' that you both discuss. And it is perhaps not surprising that so many elements of a postfeminist sensibility – the individualism, the entrepreneurial subjectivity, the emphasis on personal transformation – seem to be so present in these newer formulations. After all this is how cultural change happens: there are rarely clear breaks, newer ideas do not necessarily displace older ones, and we have to be prepared to think about continuities as well as changes if we are interested in exploring a particular cultural formation or conjuncture – as Stuart Hall would have put it. I think all three of us are interested in the way in which contemporary visibilities of feminism are shaped both by a capitalist and neoliberal context.

For me it is the contemporary embrace of a feminist identity by so many that primarily marks out a difference from the postfeminist sensibility. While postfeminism was marked by warm enthusiasm about equality, 'girl power' and female success, it was often – as Christina Scharff (2011) demonstrated so compellingly – associated with a repudiation of feminism. Indeed it was precisely that double move that intrigued Angela McRobbie (2009). What is different now is that far from repudiating feminism, it appears that many people from celebrities to politicians to business leaders are lining up to embrace a feminist identity. Feminism, in Jessica Valenti's (2014) phrase is 'having a moment'. Yet when we look at the substance or content of the forms of feminism that have greatest visibility in mainstream media this often seems very influenced by individualism, postfeminism and neoliberal corporate culture, as you have argued Sarah.

Take women's magazines for example. Laura Favaro and I (Favaro and Gill, 2018) have analysed interviews with 70 young women who work in and put together women's magazines – purveyors of what we call 'glossy feminism', a mainstream, almost ubiquitous version of this popular mediated feminism. In these interviews, we found both a sense of the obviousness of a feminist identification alongside the absence of much sense of what this might mean in terms of a politics. Often it was taken to refer to diffuse statements about 'supporting women' or it was underpinned by the argument that *anything* can be feminist as long as it is chosen. In postfeminist style, personal choice becomes mobilised as a guarantor of the 'feministness' of anything. In other words – with a few exceptions – this feminism seemed to be very similar to the postfeminist sensibility in the ideological work it was doing, except that it involved a strong – often times even defiant-sounding – championing of feminism as an identity. I am not suggesting it is inauthentic. Rather, I am really interested in what this 'hollow defiance' does ideologically and performatively.

It is something I have also been working on in relation to the new visibility of black, LGBTQ, disabled and Muslim individuals in commercial mainstream media. There's a new genre of advertising that jumps off from 'love your body' and confidence discourses to offer a dual celebration of 'diversity' and 'breaking the rules' – recent examples are from H&M, River Island and L'Oreal's 'We're all worth it' campaigns. These respond to calls for visibility and inclusion with texts that proclaim their rule breaking and defiance, and that centre stylish, glamorised wheelchair users, women who wear hijab, and trans* people (among others) in outward celebration of a carefully curated diversity. I'm struggling with some of the same questions as you around this, Sarah: the visibility is clearly important in itself – and I witnessed the real

pleasure among many of my female Muslim students at seeing a hijabi in an advert for the first time – yet very often it seems a kind of empty signifier that might even work as a means *not* to have to look – long and hard – at power relations. It seems like a kind of 'glossy diversity' – post-race (Mukherjee, 2016) and post-queer (McNicholas, Smith, and Tyler, 2017) in its sensibility.

The one element that doesn't quite resonate for me in your analysis Catherine is about the new prominence accorded to a felicitous work-family balance. I guess my reaction to this is that it feels as if it has been part of the discourse for a longer time – at least in the UK. Ideas of work-life balance have a long history, and even the 1980s image of the superwoman seemed very much premised on 'having it all'. I guess in a London context it also feels discordant – in the context of multiple and diverse family forms (shaped by class and race and religion and generational poverty), as well as a large LGBTQ population. Whilst questions of reproduction and care are indeed a perennial crisis, it seems to me that questions of sexual violence and harassment, of equal pay, and perhaps most of all the body are at least as visible in contemporary mediated feminisms.

Catherine: Let me just respond to your last comment, Ros, since this is a really important point and critique. Yes, I totally agree with you that the issues of work-life balance are nothing new, but what I would argue *is* new, at least in the US, is the positing of a happy work-family balance as feminist ideal and as the signifier for emancipation for 'progressive womanhood'. When feminists spoke about work-family issues, it was mostly through the lens of the second shift

(Hochschild, 1989). In the US in the late 1990s and early 2000s the media was obsessed with the so-called mommy wars, which were about an either/or discourse and not about balance.

Also, I would say that the superwoman model was precisely about 'having it all' and the professional working mother but not a happy balance. The Superwoman model is exactly what Slaughter argued against in her piece 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All'.

In any case, I do think that we all approach the question of feminist discourse in the cultural field from slightly different perspectives. My training is first and foremost as a feminist literary scholar, and I feel most comfortable analysing texts. Another set of differences, perhaps related to the first, has to do with the intellectual/academic context in which we work as well as, perhaps, the questions that we find generative and thus preoccupy us. They are surely similar – as we are all concerned with the evisceration of feminism of its emancipatory potential, but the foci and emphases, as Ros has pointed out, are different.

As I mentioned, my problematic, initially, revolved around the question of how and why the notion of a happy work-family balance was becoming a new ideal of progressive womanhood, which means that even as families have become more diverse, this heteronormative ideal has become even more prominent. I don't think this is coincidental. But, again, I do agree completely with Ros that context matters. Living in London now, I am beginning to get a better sense of the different inflections of this resuscitated feminist discourse and the way its articulation differs in different media. Although, as it happens, I just read an empirical study by Jill Armstrong (2017) where she demonstrates the uptake of this balance discourse among younger women. And Shani

Orgad's (2017; 2018) work also points to the perhaps belated infiltration of the work-family balance ideal into the UK context, particularly through mediated venues like *The Good Wife*.

Finally, I guess in my project on neoliberal feminism, I am concerned first and foremost with theorising dominance, which means that I look at a range of cultural texts, mainstream as well as more popular, and my focus has been on dominant discourse and the kinds of normative and affective subjects that this discourse helps to produce. As Joan Scott has recently argued, idealised norms matter not only in 'the expectations set for individual subjects, but because they set the terms for law, politics and social policy' (Scott, 2017: 32). I have been very influenced by Michel Feher (2009) and Wendy Brown's work on how neoliberal rationality creates its own 'apparatus of subjectification' where only certain subjects are deemed worthy because capital-enhancing while the rest are rendered disposable. I really do believe that in order to conceptualise and cultivate resistance, we also need to have to understand the operations of power and dominance.

Ambivalences/Alternatives

Ros: I agree totally that understanding power and dominace is crucial, Catherine! I guess I'll end by just mentioning two things that I feel ambivalent about. One relates to the new mediated visibility of feminism. Obviously there is much to celebrate here in terms of feminism now having a public visibility, after being marginalised in media and public discourse for so long, especially in terms of the way that it is facilitating discussion – and even action on topics such as equal pay and sexual harassment. I have been a feminist for more than 35 years and for all of that

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time there have been vociferous campaigns by generations of women, yet these campaigns rarely garnered sustained attention, or, if they were reported they were a tiny item tucked away on page 37, or (in a UK context) only discussed in *The Guardian*. It is clear that there's a real relationship between the media visibility of feminism and feminist energy and activism. But I'm also troubled by which versions of feminism garner visibility – the largely white, heteronormative, corporate and neoliberal-friendly versions. I am not saying there is 'one true feminism' – but I am struck again and again with which versions get to be seen and heard, and which remain marginalised. This is something I talked about in my contribution to a special issue on intergenerational feminism in *Feminist Media Studies* a couple of years ago (Gill, 2016). Here class, race, disability, and sexuality seem key – alongside the relationship to capitalism. It seems to me that the more critical, intersectional analyses with which I align myself – that see feminist struggles as necessarily connected to other liberation struggles and to a broader agenda that questions capitalism – are much less likely to be heard.

The other thing I'm struggling with is where I stand on the continued use of the term postfeminism. While, as I've said, I think in one sense that – even with the new visibility of feminism – a postfeminist sensibility has actually tightened its hold in contemporary culture, has made itself virtually hegemonic, I also recognise that the key difference is in the way that those elements co-exist with a new alacrity (albeit unevenly spread) to identify as feminist. My ambivalence then isn't about whether postfeminism still *exists* as a critical object – it does! (Just as a postracial sensibility can co-exist with widespread activism by people of colour.) The ambivalence is in using *the term* – which for new generations (of students) makes little sense. In my media class this last semester I started with five 'foundational' sessions for thinking about

contemporary media ranging over neoliberalism, thinking intersectionally, LGBTQ struggles over visibility, etc – and I placed the lecture on postfeminism *before* the one on feminism which made every kind of sense to me in thinking about the current moment but was decidedly weird for the students! I know because they told me! There are so many criticisms now of the idea of a postfeminist media culture, especially in our brand culture in which there is a hunger for the new in academia as much as anywhere else. Should I abandon the word – if not the attachment to interrogating a sense-making characterised by relentless individualism, that exculpates the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and blames women for their disadvantaged positions, that renders the intense surveillance of women's bodies normal or even desirable, that calls forth endless work on the self, that centres notions of empowerment and choice whilst enrolling women in ever more intense regimes of 'the perfect' (McRobbie, 2015)? I would understand this now in terms of a gendered neoliberalism. I would love to know your thoughts.

Catherine: I think that maintaining postfeminism as a critical concept is key and crucial – not just for understanding the past but also for understanding the current permutations of mediated feminist discourse. But, again, I might also argue that the sensibility has undergone some significant transformations, which have facilitated the rise of what I call neoliberal feminism and what Sarah calls popular feminism. The very fact that feminism is being avowed in the mainstream and popular cultural landscape seems, to me, to point to some kind of shift that needs to be taken into account. In other words, going back to my earlier question: is the cultural work that the new and very visible feminism doing exactly the same as the cultural work that the postfeminist sensibility was carrying out? I guess that would be my question.

My sense is that we are experiencing a care crisis in the Anglo-American world, and that this has to do with the way in which neoliberal rationality is colonisng ever more domains of our lives. I do also think neoliberal rationality needs a distinctive discursive register of reproduction and care work, which neoliberal feminism currently provides. So this was one of the ways I tried to account for the resurgence of feminism in the public domain.

But the feminist landscape is shifting so quickly these days. Perhaps we could say that we are currently witnessing competing sensibilities and discourses that, nevertheless, overlap, draw on yet push back one against the other? Or perhaps even as I might argue that neoliberal feminism has been on the ascendant in the US, colonising new spaces, it is clear that there are other rationalities that circulate and challenge, interact, and overlap with it. Indeed, even as I was writing my book on neoliberal feminism, making the claim that this variant was becoming dominant in the US mainstream, the feminist landscape kept changing! We have witnessed incredible changes even in the past two years.

So if I were to sum up my thoughts about the current feminist landscape and alternatives and ambivalences, I would say that in the UK and the US, we are witnessing of a number of really fascinating trends, some of which are also extremely disturbing.

First, as Sara Farris (2017) has argued, we have witnessed the way in which feminist themes have increasingly converged with neoliberalism in the US as well as been mobilised by far-right nationalist parties in Europe. We also, as Ros and Sarah have also pointed out, have an

unprecedented number of neoliberal and conservative women proudly declaring themselves feminists: from Sheryl Sandberg through Theresa May to Ivanka Trump.

Second, feminism has become popular in ways that no one would have predicted just a few years ago. As Sarah so brilliantly argues in her work, identifying as 'feminist' has become an unexpected source of cultural capital.

Again, I think that these phenomena are intimately related to the rise and entrenchment of neoliberal feminism, since when feminism encourages individual women to focus on themselves and their own aspirations, it can more easily be popularised, circulated, and capitalised in the market place. Neoliberal feminism, as Ros so rightly points out, is also an unabashedly exclusionary one, encompassing as it does, only so-called aspirational women in its address. It thus reifies white and class privilege and heteronormativity, lending itself to neo-conservative and xenophobic agendas.

Finally, at the same time that you have an explosion of popular feminism and the convergence of feminism with neoconservative and neoliberal agendas, we have also seen grassroots feminism and large-scale feminist protest reemerge as a potentially potent political force.

I am tempted to argue that, on the one hand, the rise of neoliberal feminism has helped to render feminism popular in ways few scholars could have predicted just a few years ago. And, yet, on the other hand, this process of popularisation generates a double edged sword, since as Susan Buck Morse (2003) has convincingly argued, power always produces its own vulnerability.

By facilitating feminism's widespread embrace, neoliberal feminism has also – and paradoxically – helped to pave the way for more militant and mass feminist movements, such as #metoo, the Woman's March and the Global Women's Strike. Clearly, much of the infrastructure for the recent oppositional feminist groundswell was already in place. We know that the 'Me Too' campaign initially emerged over a decade ago as part of a grassroots movement spearheaded by the African American activist Tarana Burke, and that it comes on the heels of other mobilisations, such as SlutWalk. But I would suggest that in addition to Trump's election and the reappearance of a shameless sexism in the public sphere, which has had its own galvanizing effect, #metoo was able to gain such widespread traction at this particular moment in history, at least in part, because feminism had already been embraced and rendered desirable by high-power corporate women like Sheryl Sandberg, Hollywood stars like Emma Watson as well as music celebrities like Beyoncé – to name just a few.

Taken all together, these various feminist manifestations certainly all suggest that we are experiencing a feminist renaissance of sorts. The question then becomes how we can sustain and broaden this feminist renaissance as resistance, while rejecting the logic of neoliberal feminism?

I would also say that there are movements creating hope. The feminist group that helped organise the Global Women's Strike, such as Feminism for the 99% is just one example.
These feminist movements are qualitatively different from their mainstream and popular counterparts since they challenge and even threaten neoliberalism by demanding dramatic economic, social, and cultural transformation. What is also striking about these movements, the recent wave of

mass demonstrations as well as the grassroots activists who helped organise them, is that they very consciously attempt to include and address inequalities that expand, in significant ways, the single analytic frame of gender. These are not one-issue or narrowly defined protests but rather an expression of mass discontent regarding a dizzying array of inequalities facing women, minorities, and precarious populations. My sense is that given just how bleak the future currently looks for an ever-increasing number of people across the globe, this is exactly the kind of threatening feminism that we need.

Sarah: Like Catherine and Ros just pointed out, I think it is important – indeed, a source of *hope* – to theorise the popular of popular feminism as a terrain of struggle over meaning, and it is here where I see the most potential for a productive ambivalence. Like Ros, I am, and have been throughout my career, influenced by Stuart Hall and his theorising about the terrain of the popular as one that is uneven in its dynamics between consent and resistance. Much of highly visible popular feminism, as Catherine just pointed out, is firmly within what Hall would call the 'culture of the powerful'. This is a culture of racial and economic privilege, of a kind of consent: it consents to heteronormativity, to the universality of whiteness, to dominant economic formations, to a trajectory of capitalist 'success'.

When this kind of feminism, one that consents, becomes visible in a new way, it is important because we can at least hear the messages feminism has been trying to impart for so long. I know that I have felt deep joy at hearing and seeing feminism embraced by a wide swath of people—not just my friends and colleagues! Yet this pleasure at seeing and hearing feminism in spectacular ways eclipses a feminist structural critique. By arguing this, I don't discount popular

feminism, or think of it as politically vacuous, but rather I understand popular feminisms

precisely through *ambivalence*, rather than through a reductive binary that asks us to determine

the authenticity of certain feminisms over others. Through a lens of ambivalence, we can more

clearly see the relationship between popular feminisms and populist feminisms rather than cast

them as diametrically opposed.

But what does it mean, actually, to use ambivalence as an analytic? In *Empowered*, I find Lauren

Berlant's work on this especially useful. She points out that in popular culture, 'ambivalence is

seen as the failure of a relation, the opposite of happiness, rather than as an inevitable condition

of intimate attachment and a pleasure in its own right' (2008: 2). I agree that ambivalence is an

inevitable condition of intimate attachment, which is precisely why it is so useful in

understanding the media circulation of popular feminisms. And, this intimate attachment is a

pleasure in its own right. But, this is not a zero-sum game; pleasure and intimate attachments *are*

political; there is not one authentic feminism that cancels out an inauthentic one. The refusal of

the zero-sum game, contra Berlant, *does* signal a kind of failure, but it is a productive failure, a

failure that produces a certain kind of public and popular awareness, an opening in the public's

imagination, to imagine a different set of norms for gender and sexual difference. Leaning on

Jack Halberstam's work on the queer art of failure, I want to suggest that those who practice

productive failure 'use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life

in the US' (2011: 4).

For Halberstam, failure repudiates oppressive social relations and gives those who 'fail' relief

from the pressure to measure up to constraining and patriarchal norms of achievement, which are

themselves a form of unfreedom. I think we can find this within popular feminism, where sometimes productive failure provides the opening to map a different logic of being in the world than what is dictated by an idealised masculine soverign subject.

And we can see where these opportunities are taken up, those popular feminisms that share some characteristics of media visibility and popularity but challenge and expose the whiteness of much of popular feminism, or use media visibility as a way to expose structural violence, or are non-heteronormative and intersectional. Social media has created what Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner call 'the ambivalent internet', and this surely works as a context for popular feminism as well (Phillips and Milner, 2017). On Twitter, alongside corporate ads that exhort girls to just 'be empowered' we also have Black Twitter, as Caitlin Gunn (2015), Dayna Chatman (2017), Andre Brock (2012) and others have shown, which has become a place for feminists of color to create campaigns for social justice. The blogosphere is rife with popular feminist musings, outrage, and community, and some critique the whiteness of much popular feminism and offer important intersectional analyses of gendered power relations in contemporary culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

So, while I think that a highly visible, spectacular feminism often dominates our mediascape, I also think it is possible to imagine a different feminist politics, to shift us from a *popular* feminism to a *populist* one (and I mean 'populist' in the sense of being about people and activism, not as a stand-in for far-right movements across the globe). We need to think, as feminist activist/scholar Liz Mason-Deece argues so powerfully, in terms of 'assemblies', where feminists think of connections and intersections between different realms of life, rather than

reducing gender issues to a single realm (Mason-Deece, 2018). As Mason-Deece argues, 'these

connections have been made through the practice of assemblies, where women share stories of

facing sexual harassment on the job, of being afraid to advocate for better working conditions

because of fear of violence, of staying in abusive relationships because they lack the economic

means to leave.' We can see some of these connections, as Catherine has pointed out, in recent

feminist movements such as #metoo and the International Women's Strike. Mason-Deece, in her

piece 'From #metoo to #WeStrike: A politics in feminine' discusses what the #metoo movement

can learn from Latin American feminists, and how a more global perspective can help create a

politics that challenges some of the fundamental bases of gender inequality, not one that begins

and potentially ends with media visibility (Mason-Deece, 2018).

Within the context of the vast women's strikes in Argentina over the past few years, Mason-

Deece argues for a different kind of popular feminism, which in part 'emerges from the

frustration women experienced participating in other movements, be they movements of the

unemployed, the workers' cooperative movements, or other populist and leftist struggles. In each

of these, women were central to both everyday organizing and the day-to-day practices that kept

these struggles together'. The 'keeping the struggles together' is the usually invisible labor of

social reproduction that mostly women do, in every context. This keeping the struggles together

also, as Silvia Federici has discussed, allows for the emergence of the 'collective subject' – the

subject that is not only crucial to populism but antithetical to the 'popularity' of popular

feminism that immediately centres the individual (Federici, 2014). This kind of care work, unlike

the kind that is privileged in what Catherine has coined 'neoliberal feminism', exposes the

contradictions within the neocapitalist context for postfeminism and popular feminism.

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During the time that the three of us were having this conversation, and then writing it out, stories about sexual harassment, sexual assault, and other forms of sexual violence continued to pour in through the mainstream, alternative, and social media. It seems like every week (and sometimes every *day*) there was a new revelation: multiple stories of sexual harassment in higher education; sexual assault accusations about the US Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh; continued exposures of powerful men in the media industries, including Les Moonves, the President of CBS in the US; the 'come back' stories of accused sexual harrassers and sexual predators such as comedian Louis CK and radio personality Rain Ghomeshi; star athlete Serena Williams was the victim of sexist officiating, and then again the target of racism and sexism for her reaction to such officiating. It is overwhelming and exhausting to read these stories constantly. It is hard not to think that change is a long way away. But it is precisely this kind of structural sexism and misogyny that mobilized us to have this conversation, and to engage in this kind of feminist project.

Thus, as a way of concluding, it seems important to underscore that each of us, in her own way, has expressed her enjoyment at thinking with, through and even against one another. Our divergent points of entry and optics all contribute to thinking through the contemporary landscape. And, again, we consider this conversation with each other, about differences and similar threads between and within our perspectives, as a feminist project. What we have tried to offer above – both to each other and to other feminist scholars – is a conjunctural analysis of the various and often conflicting manifestations of feminism currently circulating in mainstream and

popular culture, and we have outlined how we have come to understand the ways in which these manifestations borrow from as well as compete with one another in the contemporary landscape.

This kind of critical engagement has also helped to clarify as well as to challenge various aspects of our thinking. This is the first time, for instance, that each one of us has specifically addressed how postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, and popular feminism draw on and feed off one another, even as they are not reducible one to another. We don't necessarily agree on the precise nature of this inter-relationship, but we have tried to outline both the lines of convergence as well as divergence. Moreover, this kind of conversation has also highlighted, yet again, how our differences can be productively juxtaposed in order to generate new and urgent conceptual questions – for us and for other feminist scholars. The challenges that we have posed to one another: about the US-centric or UK-centric tendency of our analyses, how the current avowal of feminism may complicate discussions of postfeminist sensibility as a critical object, the continued legacy of liberal feminism even within popular and neoliberal feminsim, and our sometimes diverging understandings of neoliberalism – as an advanced stage of capitalism or as a political rationality (or both!) – have proven incredibly useful for thinking through and perhaps even beyond our current positions. We feel that this kind of on-going collabortive conversation is urgently needed in the contemporary moment. And while we may approach the question of the hows and whys of the emergence of highly visible mediated feminisms somewhat differently, we all clearly share a politics of economic, racial and gendered justice.

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