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Platform Feminism: Protest and the Politics of Spatial Organization

Rianka Singh

This article brings into question the political utility of platforms as media for feminist resistance. Using examples of #MeToo, and the Women's March on Washington, movements that have relied on the platform for reinvigorating what Sarah Banet-Weiser has called "popular feminism" (2018), I argue that common media platforms tend to infer an underlying assumption of safety, privilege and power in relation to social space. Through highlighting how BIPOC people organize in social space, I argue that the focus on amplification and elevation, facilitated by the logics of platform, obscures the needs of those who resist on the margins. I introduce the spatial strategies employed by those who must negotiate space differently to challenge the centrality of platforms as media the structure contemporary feminist protest.

The stage at the 2017 Women's March on Washington was large and draped with vinyl banners that could be read from a distance. In news footage and in images that circulated online in the days following the march, the black platform, and the few bodies that stand on it, are raised in the center of a space packed with pink hats and protest signs. Protesters center themselves around the stage. The stage acts as an anchor so that individual bodies, and by extension the crowd, become oriented around it. The role of the stage, the raised platform, occupies an enduring place within histories and practices of feminist activism. Contemporary discourse around platforms and feminism though, focuses not on the material stages that have become places from which feminist politics are articulated, but rather on the digital platforms that have are understood to be important tools for feminist projects. We might think of Twitter, blogging, and other digital apps as media to raise one's voice – a digital soap box that amplifies an individual's voice. In this paper, I reconsider digital platforms as places for feminist activism. I introduce and question the platform as a significant media that structures feminist politics today. How can we begin to understand the different spatial

and mediated strategies of activists whose relationships to space are more complicated than the symbol and activating of the platform?

With its pink knitted hats and witty signage, The Women's March on Washington emerged last year as a symbolic grand counter-narrative to the Trump administration. Alongside the March, #MeToo and #Timesup social media hashtags are other expressions of what Sarah Banet Weiser (2018) calls popular feminism that have dominated popular discourse in North America and beyond over the past few months. All of these recent high-profile events have been subject to misogynistic responses. The legitimacy of the public claims of sexual assault and harassment have been up for debate and the protests have been mocked. Journalist Andrew Sullivan even called for a resistance of "the excesses of #Metoo" (2018), writing the movement off as nothing more than "sex panic". However, these movements have also been denounced by feminist scholars for reinforcing the very universalizing and essentialist perceptions of 'women' that have historically excluded most non-white middle-class women, trans, and queer people (Moss and Maddrell 2017; Willoughby 2017). The protests have been charged as corporate and neoliberal because they disarticulate systematic violence and seem blind to other forms of oppression beyond middle class white women's experience in public space. (Rottenberg 2017).

Significantly each of these recent feminist mobilizations rely on digital media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Such social media platforms lend themselves to making feminism visible and accessible. The *platform* has become synonymous with social media and mobile apps in the context of digital culture (Gillespie, 2010; Hands, 2013; Langlois and Elmer, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Snerick, 2017) and it is this iteration of the word that is most commonly associated with mediated contemporary feminist movements. But, sometimes such movements also sometimes employ physical platforms. For example the stages at the Women's March gave a platform to feminist politics by way of celebrities and other popular feminists.. The role of the stage, the raised platform, occupies an enduring place within histories and practices of feminist activism. Stages, podiums, and soap boxes *and* digital platforms are all media that amplify, elevate, and make bodies visible. But all of these rather common media platforms tend to infer an underlying assumption of safety, privilege and power in relation to social space. The focus on platforms tends to obscure the needs of those who do not take so readily to platforms. Since platforms both elevate only some voices and regulate action, they also necessarily reproduce a certain kind of feminism. Some ways of resisting are deemed acceptable, while others are not. For instance, those more subject to misogynist, racist

and homophobic abuse either look to resist differently or are not amplified by platforms. This is at odds with the logic of intersectional feminism as simultaneous forms of oppression are not given equal footing on the platform. This is not to say the online tools cannot or should not be used for feminist political projects, but that platforms might limit the possibilities of feminist politics. By making connections between the material stage at the Women's March on Washington, and the digital platforms of other expressions of contemporary popular feminism, I argue that for feminist political activism to be generative, the platform needs to be put aside.

I approach the platform as a medium that is significant for altering political and social relations. I am not so much interested in the content shared on platforms but rather in the possibility of platforms as media that structure the political and that have their own sets of logics. This line of thinking is informed by McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" (1964) and more recently by the work of media theorists highlighting the ways in which media structure the social and political, and in doing so, broadening what we might understand as media in the first place (Sharma 2008; Brock 2012; Packer and Wiley 2012; McPherson 2014; Feigenbaum 2014). Anna Feigenbaum (2014), for example, suggests in her article about the media of Occupy that "when objects and architectures are repeatedly encountered at sites of struggle, they become stickier and stickier, laden with meaning and potent with feelings" (p.17). The platform as a medium that appears again and again at sites of feminist struggle is a potent value laden object and its relationship to feminism requires nuanced exploration.

For those who experience life as intersectional, many of whom are women and black, brown, queer, trans and disabled, space has to be negotiated differently. *Spatial strategies* of marginalized bodies include everyday methods of negotiating space and moving through the world. This might include things like travelling in groups, choosing to walk the streets only at specific times of the day, setting up protests in places that are proximate to particular locations like police stations or hospitals or practicing self-care. Another example can be located in *The Winter We Danced* (2014), where the Kino-nda-niimi Collective gathers writing from the Idle No More movement which centers on the indigenous practice of invading North American malls to perform round dances as an act of resistance. The practice of round dance as resistance can also be read as a differential spatial strategy. These strategies are developed both in response to dealing with institutional rules of particular spaces and for survival. For some, the differential spatial strategies that emerge are focused on factors like safety, escape, concealment and care over that of amplification and popularizing resistance movements. But this

focus on strategies and survival is not antithetical to organizing protest or the climactic taking to the state. The need to constantly reconfigure ways of convening need to be read as significant practices of political resistance.

In 2016 for example, members of the Black Lives Matter movement camped outside of the Toronto Police Headquarters for two weeks in protest of the police shooting of Andrew Loku. For those who camped out, the space became one of “community healing and building” according to BLMTO’s co-founder, Alexandria Williams. Unlike the focus on visibility, or what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) has called “affirmational feminism” that has become characteristic of popular movements like the Women’s March or #metoo, all made possible by various platforms, these other spatial considerations account for the critical concerns of women who are of color, queer, trans, and/ or disabled. The platform is a culturally dominating media form that is limited in its capacity to register and account for intersectional feminist forms of resistance and refusal. In other words, the material platform of protests and marches is quite often a media that is refused. What we might consider uncovering and amplifying instead are the *differential spatial strategies* that marginalized feminist activists employ.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/singh-Picture1.png>)

Figure 1: Protesters dancing at Black Lives Matter tent city, Toronto Police headquarters (Toronto Star, April 3, 2016).

A similar spatial strategy of offline activism and protest sites is mirrored in online feminist activism. Digital platforms are online applications, defined by Nick Srnicek as “business that provide the hardware and software foundations for others to operate on” (2017, p.6). Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have been incorporated into digital activism through major international movements like the Arab

Spring and Occupy Wall Street, where the online sites were used for organizing and building new forms of collectivity (Gerbaudo 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Milan 2013; Pappacharisi 2014). Feminism's relationship to the platform is apparent through the ways in which social media sites like Twitter, or activities like blogging, are often regarded – especially in popular discourse, as reinvigorating and propelling contemporary feminism. Despite popular discourse's preoccupation with platform-enabled feminism, which makes it look particularly current, the platform has been a feminist tool in various forms since at least the early 1900s. Online platforms are both important tools and sites for feminist protest because they give voice to those that have historically been excluded or erased from public discourse and also because they can be used as tools for organizing (Baer 2016; Keller, 2012; Rentschler 2015). However, scholars who are engaged in work on intersectional feminism problematize the democratic promise of digital platforms by arguing that platforms uphold and recreate existing structures of misogyny, racism and ableism in the 21st century (Noble and Tynes 2016). Like the material stage that reproduces a particular kind of feminism by amplifying only some voices, so too do digital platforms. Jessie Daniels', in her important piece, "The Trouble with White Feminism: Whiteness, Digital Feminism and the Intersectional Internet," (2016) makes the argument that undertheorized in scholarship about digital feminism is the "dominance of White women as architects and defenders of a particular framework of feminism in the digital era" (42). Daniels posits that the ways in which online feminism is often articulated in popular culture is through a White feminist lens and she asks us to dissect how "White feminism has benefited from this technological development" (56). Daniels suggests that because white women are the architects of digital feminism, white privilege is embedded in these systems, constraining their accessibility and utility to people of colour and other minoritized populations.

It is worth situating this argument about platforms within contemporary media studies and in particular the emerging field of study related to digital platforms and digital platform politics. In recent years, media studies scholars have turned their attention to the platform. MIT Press has an entire series on Platform Studies and in 2013 the journal *Culture Machine* published an issue on "platform politics". Including the word "platform" in a conference CFP is sure to yield a healthy number of interesting applicants. This is all to say that the rise of the platform as an object of study has been rapid, and as a result, the platform as a site of study has gone unchecked in particular ways. Specifically, a materialist reading of the platform from a feminist perspective has yet to be developed. Prevailing approaches to the platform can be categorized into work

that fits squarely into what has come to be called “Platform Studies”, scholarship on digital activism, and feminist approaches to the platform. Across these approaches, few questions are raised about whether or not the platform is actually doing productive work for feminism; it instead has an assumed utility or political necessity. To question the platform and its role in feminist resistance is also to destabilize an understanding of feminist digital resistance that does not function as it should for feminists on the margins.

Prevailing contemporary discourse about ‘the platform’ in Platform Studies doesn’t focus on material stages, and other raised surfaces in physical space, but rather on digital platforms. The *platform* has become synonymous with social media and mobile apps in the context of digital culture (Gillespie 2010; Hands 2013; Langlois and Elmer 2013; Taylor 2014; Srnicek 2017). Those who address platform labour (Graham 2017), platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) and platform politics (Hands 2013) will argue that computing platforms shape, constrain, support, or deny important social and political interactions through studies of the so-called ‘gig economy’. There is a significant body of scholarship that has established that digital platforms are not neutral media. Instead platforms are understood to be imbued with hierarchies of power wherein information is inequitably distributed with differential effects (Gillespie 2010). In some instances, ‘platforms’ are positioned and discussed as digital infrastructures that join groups of people and enable financial transactions (Hands 2013; Srnicek 2017). There have been some connections made between material platforms as raised surfaces and situated physical places, and digital platforms in the fields of software studies and media and communication studies (Bratton, 2016, Gillespie, 2010). In *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, Benjamin H. Bratton offers the etymology of the word *platform*, providing three connotations: “platform as a plan of action, as a stage for a plan, and as proposed rules of governance” (2016, 43). Platform studies as a new field has been important for both naming and establishing the new sets of relationships that are enabled by computing infrastructures and various mobile applications. This emerging area of study has also addressed resistance enacted on and through digital platforms by focusing specifically on labour and the gig economy. But there is much work to be done in the field of platform studies, especially because feminist, queer and POC perspectives are largely missing. Comprehensive studies of the platform need to trouble an assumption that theorizing resistance can only be done when platforms are approached as sites of particular kinds of labour. In addition, it is important to center our questions about the platform less on their technological affordances, and more on the people who use them. Important here is the work of intersectional and materialist

media theorists who look to make visible differentiated bodies and voices that operate on digital platforms (Hedge 2011; Gajalla 2012; McPherson 2014). André Brock (2012) for example (2012), in his work on Black Twitter problematizes “social science and communication research that attempts to preserve a color-blind perspective on online endeavors by normalizing Whiteness and othering everyone else” (546). This shift in thinking might help develop a model for difference, rather than reifying existing power structures.

When online platforms figure into feminist scholarship in media and communication studies it is through discussions of the political possibilities allowed via digital media (Keller 2012; Rentschler 2015; Baer 2016). In her article “Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics and Neoliberalism”, Hester Baer (2016) commenting on hashtag feminism, posits that “In providing a critical platform for such discussions, feminist Twitter campaigns literally ‘redo feminism’” (29). This work, although important for highlighting how some feminist activists have used digital platforms for resistance seems to assume a particular boundedness to the platform. Without thinking about the platform from a materialist perspective, which existing literature does not do, it is difficult to think of digital feminisms beyond the logics of platforms.

Through intervening in these fields by raising questions about the platform and its role in structuring intersectional feminist struggle it might be possible to uncover or at least highlight, the important ways in which women who are also POC, queer, trans and/or disabled, develop differential spatial strategies in moments of resistance. We need to begin to think about how feminist struggle has been bound to various iterations of the platform and by extension to normative spatial organizations and how these arrangements are constantly being renegotiated.

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Rianka Singh (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/riankasingh>)

Rianka Singh is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information and has been a PhD resident at the McLuhan Center for Culture and Technology. Rianka's doctoral research focuses on the intersection of feminist media studies, platform studies and feminist geography.



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